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# **Representation and Identity in Contemporary Performance**

**Adrian Heathfield**

A thesis submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Ph.D. in the Faculty of Arts, Department of Drama: Theatre, Film, Television, September 1997.

## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the relationship between the representational dynamics of contemporary performance and the charged question of the cultural formation of identity. Examining recent art works joined by their use of particular performance aesthetics, the thesis asserts that the works in question agitate against and resist the representational structures through which they are perceived. In order to interrogate the question of identity, the thesis combines influences from diverse critical terrains to analyse the activities of the (spectating and acting) subject, particularly in relation to its practices of knowledge and Self constitution. Through a discussion of debates within moral and ethical theory, a model of ethics is advanced based upon the putting into question of the epistemic practices of the subject. The dynamics inherent to this ethics, an opening of discursive limitations towards their Other, are then seen to operate within and through performance. Extending the cultural significance of this analysis the thesis addresses the means through which performance may bring the subject, against social, psychic and cultural prescriptions, into a particular encounter with the alterity of death. The significance of the subject's encounter with alterity within performance is then examined in relation to the sensory realm of subjectivity. Drawing on understandings from phenomenology the thesis analyses the ways in which the subject's habitual economies of thought reduce its physical and sensory realities to linguistic orders. Locating this reduction within particular histories of thought, the thesis examines the means through which performance may come to question such operations. Finally turning to the categories of knowledge through which the subject's identity may be formed, the thesis explores the cultural institution of these categories, their utility to discourses of power and their relation to and operation upon the subject. Focusing on the questions of sex, gender and ethnicity, the thesis examines the ways in which particular performance aesthetics come to disrupt and challenge the institution of identity for the subject.



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For Andrew Quick whose thought and love have sustained me in this.




## **Author's Declaration**

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I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified as such and that the thesis is the product of my individual labour and is not the product of collaborative work. No part of this thesis has already been or is being submitted for any such degree, diploma or qualification.

The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and not of the University of Bristol.

Signed ...  .....

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## 1. Introduction

### *Aesthetics of Performance*

The critical act that traditionally constitutes the introduction of a work of knowledge is one that defines the parameters of the study, and thus inevitably, is an act that marks boundaries and indicates inclusions and exclusions. Some of these exclusions may be known to the author, others simply may be unintentional omissions. Yet regardless of the unconscious slips and aporias of writing, it falls to the author, by way of introduction, to explain the consciously wrought borders and limitations of their text. In the context of a work of performance theory the author (and the reader) may reasonably ask, which performances, critical texts and concepts are used within this thesis and which not? What are the justifications for the drawing of lines within the work, its choices of ‘ins’ and of ‘outs’? To introduce the thesis and to answer these questions is then to designate objects of knowledge, and to equate what is included with what is known, and what is excluded with what does not need to be known. To introduce, like any form of definitional and nominative activity, any scriptural act, is to ascribe meaning and value. It is precisely these operations of knowledge, the establishment of epistemic limits, the inclusions and exclusions within the realm of what is known, that will form the central concern of this thesis and will be explored and analysed in relation to the aesthetics of contemporary performance. As Michel de Certeau argues in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, these operations of delimitation and spatial distinction are inherent to all products within “scriptural economies”, all practices of representation.<sup>1</sup> Whether in relation to the



dynamics of critical theories or of cultural artefacts, de Certeau sees representation as the product of a consciousness which seeks mastery of its objects. This authority is realised through the establishment of representations as autonomous places. The creation of the boundary of this representation, and thus the separation of its interior and exterior, is intrinsic to its integrity and the security of its knowledge-power. By identifying and naming what is known, representation is able to exclude and disqualify what is not known. De Certeau also notes that the mastery which consciousness seeks is instituted and maintained, not only by operations of thought, but also by the operations of sight.<sup>2</sup> Sight, through observation and measurement, locates objects within the field of visibility and by this objectification within the realms of conscious mastery.

The objects of my own vision and of my will to know are diverse examples of contemporary performance. However, as objects of sight and knowledge, performances are rarely co-operative or pliant. The artworks discussed within this thesis, as complex and ephemeral events, are resistant to their translation into the scriptural economies of performance theory. These two distinct orders of representation have very different dynamics, and the operation of one upon the other is one that can be seen as an act of reduction and subjection. De Certeau articulates an analogous dilemma in his consideration of the operations of the analysis of everyday mythology.<sup>3</sup> For de Certeau the mythologist is necessarily involved in a process which wrenches the act (of mythological use) from its temporal, spatial and intersubjective context. Indeed the science of mythology is predicated on its ability to perform such an abstraction: the refiguring of events into discourse. What is absent from this science, as de Certeau



conceives it, is the contextual usage of the myth. Only that which can be separated and is receptive to discursivity will be transferred, rendered and thus read. Performance theory, as a scriptural activity, is similarly involved in a re-ordering and compression of the temporal, spatial and intersubjective dynamics of acts into its own representational schema.

The critical powers of performance writing are dealt a blow by this understanding of their operation, since it asserts that, in relation to acts and events, performance theory will always misconstrue and fail to master its object. However, this does not mean that readers and writers of events should lay down their tools in the face of a hopeless task. The degradation of the powers of writing which de Certeau's thought evinces is accompanied by an understanding of its residual force, its ability, though partial and enervated, to provide temporary frameworks which might give access to a better understanding of the event. De Certeau contends that textual practices produce forms of fractional knowledge as "imbricated traces" through which one might begin to "dream" the lost event. The writing of the event is then a ghost, a spectre, through which the reader's imagination must play, with nothing *more* than the imprint of a history. The 'unique scene' of the act is always unrecovered, deferred by the multiple possibilities of the lost event. This notion of the relation between writing and the event is one which places performance theory within a fragile circuit of possession and dispossession. The moment of performance is irreducible, yet this statement reflects an opacity, a mythologisation, which must be resisted by criticism. Criticism intervenes, creating productive knowledges, but nonetheless reducing the moment. The object remains elusive, the event is silently in



excess of the word, enforcing again the sense of its irreducibility. This conception of the relation between events and critical texts must at least lead to a certain modesty in writing, a certain acknowledgement within critical articulations of the terms and operations of reduction which performance theory enacts upon its anterior, and always exterior, performance event. As will shortly become apparent, this thesis, to a large extent, is an attempt to address, work over and understand what is lost, suppressed and unarticulated in the subjection of performance by representational structures, and how performance may come within representation to insinuate and make evident this loss.

It will be my contention throughout this thesis, that the performance works I discuss are themselves embroiled in a problematisation of the very operations of representation that de Certeau articulates; the mechanisms of mastery, containment, and exclusion which are proper to the creation of objects of knowledge. Discussing distinct areas of cultural critique, I will examine the specific structures of knowledge and the powers through and for which such mechanisms may operate. I will argue that interrogations of the boundaries of knowledge within artworks take place through disruptions of the properties and proprieties of representational structure. Through analyses of the formal arrangements of these works I will detail the ways in which representational frameworks are advanced and broken-down through their opening, contradiction and exposure in performance. These ruptures and disturbances of representational coherence and integrity will also be seen as a means through which the ontology of the artwork is brought into question. Somewhat like de Certeau's notion of the tactical subversions of institutional knowledges, the operations of performance analysed here are not ranged within and against a singular fixed



representational edifice or artform category, but rather reflect approaches to diverse aesthetic forms.<sup>4</sup> Hence this thesis is not drawn in relation to an individual aesthetic discipline (and its proper terms), against which performance is seen to agitate. Forced Entertainment, whose work forms a significant part of my address, are a Sheffield-based performance company whose oeuvre reflects a complex mix of artform influences and languages. In the particular works discussed within this thesis, their performance practice is analysed in terms of its re-use and subversion of theatrical orders of signification. The work of the Chicago-based company Goat Island can be seen as an example of the hybrid form commonly known as physical theatre, which as Ana Sanchez-Colberg has argued, is a melding of the formal properties of dance and theatre traditions.<sup>5</sup> The works by individual London-based artists Stephen Taylor Woodrow and Gordana Stanisic, blend together the aesthetics of installation art (emerging from fine art traditions) with those of performance. This particular set of inclusions (and exclusions) is then, one that draws together artists and art practices from somewhat distinct disciplinary areas. What brings these works together aesthetically and why are they collected here?

Across these performance works, operating within and against differentiable (though increasingly unstable) artform categories, it is possible to outline, by means of an introduction, a series of recurring aesthetic aspects. These aspects, as elements of the representational systems in which they appear, will be seen to employ distinct operations upon the representational security and ontological stability of their context artworks. Within each chapter of this thesis the formulation and cultural significance of these operations is presented in relation to different discursive frameworks. Occurring uniquely



across distinct artform categories, these aesthetic aspects are not uniform, nor are they advanced here in order to indicate, compose or institute an aesthetic genre or movement. Nor would it be appropriate to elevate these elements of aesthetics to the status of a ‘vocabulary’ with which performance artists commonly ‘speak’. Rather, they reflect the aesthetic means through which specific artists come to utilise and interrogate the representational structures within which they have chosen to work. The following analysis of these factors is similarly not presented as a universally applicable aesthetic of performance; a general framework through which performance practices may be categorised or measured.

Each of these performances, within very different contexts, bares the traces of an employment of the performing body in a manner which Tim Etchells has described as “*action in real time and space*”.<sup>6</sup> This notion of action, which Etchells sees as most clearly articulated within Fiona Templeton and Howell’s seminal work, *Elements of Performance Art*, and in the performance practices of Theatre of Mistakes upon which this book was based, was influential within the experimental theatre and live art cultures from which the British performance makers included within this thesis emerged, and is evident in distinctly modified terms within each of the works I discuss.<sup>7</sup> Templeton names this work “solid state drama” and argues that its dynamics include, “enquiries about the nature of space and the nature of time, being, not acting, the reinvention of the art of the exercise which is action, [and] attempted structures for the amplification of the present”.

Templeton’s phrasing refers to a styling of action, utilised by Theatre of Mistakes, which reduced the performers activities to their minimal contents, stripping away factors of the



aesthetic until the performance was evidently constituted by elemental aspects. The work was thus characterised by its attention to formal properties; in particular an interest in the ‘simple’ relations between the performing body, objects, space, narrative and time. This stylisation of action is ghosted in the works I discuss, whether brought into more theatrically elaborate settings and codifications in the work of Forced Entertainment, employed in relation to heightened physical and gestural languages of performance in the work of Goat Island, or reduced into the miniature parameters of facial expression and ‘the walk’ evident in Taylor Woodrow and Stanasic’s performance-installation works. However the terms through which action is understood within this thesis differ considerably from the perspective which Etchell’s re-phrasing of Templeton’s work advances. For whilst this thesis and the works with which it is concerned, share an interest in the elemental properties of the performance act, in particular an interest in the dynamics of action, space and time, the notion of these elements as “real”, which seems instantly to institute a dichotomy between itself and some non-real action (perhaps illusionistic, or fictive?), is one which the thesis and the works discussed within it are highly resistant to.

It is perhaps this stylisation of the body and its corresponding order of performance action which Michael Kirby attempts to locate and name in his influential article ‘Acting and Not-Acting’.<sup>8</sup> In this article, Kirby, working within the heat of a structuralist enthusiasm, attempts to establish a taxonomy of performance, in which a continuum of action is identified, and across which a scale (of degree and quality) of acting is drawn, ranging from acting to not-acting. Kirby persuasively articulates the ways in which action within a



performance is employed within matrices of signification and representation. However, his attitude towards the boundaries of this representational mesh and its inherence to and containment of action, is deeply ambivalent. Kirby associates orders of representation such as feigning, illusion and simulation as the province of the pole of acting within his spectrum. Thus orders of action such as those described by Templeton and Howell, which strip 'theatrical' signifiers and are composed of 'unadorned' activity, are reified and located outside of the matrices of representation. The theoretical understanding of action advanced within this thesis is one which is antithetical to Kirby's notion of a non-semiotic, non-representational real, which as Marvin Carlson has remarked, is an impossibility presaged in the logical contradictions of Kirby's own work.<sup>9</sup> The perspective from which this thesis works casts the net of systems of linguistic signification much wider than Kirby's initial attempt, and is incredulous to a notion of action outside of systems of representation.

In this respect the thesis works from an understanding of *eventhood* which is broadly correspondent with that understanding presented within many poststructuralist philosophies and critical theories. Here the event is not seen as some form of originary scene, but rather a scene which takes place *always already* within the structures of language. Further, it will become apparent in specific instances within the thesis, that the forms of performance action presented here, cannot simply be seen as contained within and by signifying processes, but are themselves engaged in an acknowledgement, a signification, of this very containment. In particular works that I discuss there is a degree of self-consciousness and self-referentiality inherent within the use of action. The self-



referentiality of action will be seen as a formal strategy which is dependent on a specific conceptualisation of the relation between text and action. Action will not be seen as a lower or later form in a hierarchy of production, an ontologically independent activity, which is brought to illustrate, embellish, or realise a pre-given text. Rather action will be seen to be presented in the work as an activity that is always already imbued with textuality. In Chapter Two, for instance, this self-consciousness will be framed in terms of a notion of action as reading, where the use of action is seen as an evident re-working and manipulation of the signifying properties which the performance piece itself employs.

The scenic and installational use of *space* is also a recurrent aspect of the aesthetics analysed here. In particular the thesis will repeatedly return to question the ways in which spatial cohesion, singularity and stability may be both instituted within an aesthetic and dispersed through performance. Consequently the analysis will often be concerned with the means through which the works discussed come to question or undermine notions of *place*. The distinction between space and place which my analysis will implicitly operate is drawn from de Certeau's distinction in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, where he argues that place is a conceptualisation and organisation of space which imposes unity, distinction, propriety and stasis.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, space, as it will be understood within this thesis, is a fluid and contradictory form. As de Certeau has argued,

space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs and contractual proximities.[...] In contradistinction to the place, it has thus none of the univocity or stability of a



‘proper’.<sup>11</sup>

In this respect many of the works discussed here will be seen to employ aesthetic formations which rupture and disturb the organisation of place by insinuating and restoring the dynamics of space. Unities, stases, and boundaries are repeatedly perturbed by fragmentations, fluidities and spatial transgressions. This agitation of, and resistance to, the propriety of place is seen in a number of different forms and contexts within the thesis.

The spatial dynamics and scenic ploys of Forced Entertainment are explored in terms of their use of skeletal tracings of place, meta-theatrical spatial frameworks, the recognition within scenic formations of place as a textual construct, and the employment of differing and multiple textual invocations which apply degrees of fictional coherence and dispersal to their stagings. Taylor Woodrow’s work will be analysed in relation to its employment of place within the traditions of installational practice, the construction of hybrid and interstitial spaces between differing institutional resonances of cultural place, and along with the work of Stanislavski, its use of an invocation of place which is not wholly apparent within the site of the gallery. Here, the use of objects will be seen as a significant factor in the questioning of place, and in particular the use of de-contextualised objects to disturb the fixity of spatial signification. In the work of Goat Island, space will be seen in terms of its location of, and creation of a relation between, the bodies of the performers and the spectators. Here, and throughout the analysis, there will be an address to the tactics of displacement employed in contemporary performance, particularly in relation to the spatial traditions and institutions of the gallery and the theatre contexts within which the work is staged. These tactics of displacement within the works I discuss are not simply formal



exploits, but renderings of the aesthetic which contain a powerful cultural address. In order to facilitate the analysis of the broad significance of these works, the thesis will explore the cultural, philosophical and epistemological discourses which intersect with the formation of place.

The performance works discussed here are similarly joined by their attention to the dynamics of *time* within the live event and their manipulations, appropriations, re-orderings and disruptions of these dynamics. These approaches to temporal organisation will be seen to dramatically affect the experience and understanding of the spectator within the works in question. Here, temporal order will not be seen as a neutral force, as a given phenomena or natural occurrence. Rather, temporal order will be portrayed as deeply implicated within cultural values, movements and histories. The discussion of temporal dynamics within performance events will thus seek to explore the means through which temporal manipulation is influenced by, and brought to question the values of, particular contexts around the work. While these contexts vary in different pieces, it is possible to identify recurrent formal tactics in relation to time across the performances collected here.

A foregrounding of the present time of enactment, will be seen as common to all of these performance pieces, often bringing with it, a complex and ambivalent figuration of the originality of the moments which the spectators witness. The organisation of time and its perception as a *linearity* and as a *progressive movement* is strongly highlighted and manipulated in each of the works I will discuss. The unity and directionality of time is frequently brought into question within the performances, in order to destabilise values



which have sedimented around these formulations. Narrative structures will be shown to play a significant role as the object of this temporal address, and in particular the organisation of time through narrative as a developmental flow pressed towards an ending or closure. The manipulation of the time of spectatorship will be explored as a principal factor in many of the performances. A number of the works employ durational dynamics; utilising highly extended performance times, an extension which here, as often within the history of durational performance, is allied with a use of the performing body under extreme conditions of physical difficulty. Whilst none of the works which I will discuss here, utilise the degree of physical abjection popularly and historically associated with durational works, they nonetheless share with this work, through their use of the body in duress, an emphasis of the effects of time upon and in the body. Linear and chronological time, will be seen as a cultural construct ordering a human experience, to which it is not innately inherent. The fixing of time into linear and progressive orders, is then, one that will be understood as inscribing particular cultural values upon the body. Furthermore, the aesthetic form which temporal progression takes will not be exclusively portrayed as the province of narrative; my analysis will assert that a linear framework of temporality may be imposed upon the body through choreography, or through the succession of action in performance, where the body may be brought into a linear and unidirectional flow and thus subjected to the discourses which require this alignment.

The problematisation of representational structures which the performance works enact will also frequently be seen to involve a troubling of the objecthood of the work or elements within the work. This perturbation of objecthood will be seen through three



inter-related theoretical frameworks. Within the realms of epistemology the objecthood of the work will be seen as the surrender and clear solidification of phenomena in relation to the attentions and operations of the knowing subject. In this respect objecthood will be associated with the definitive practices of representation, the assignment of place, name and identity. In relation to the specular practices of the audience or witness of the performance works, objecthood will be seen as that positioning within the field of visibility, the formation of that static and receptive point of focus, in relation to which the spectating subject is able to locate themselves. This framework will be complemented by a third phenomenological understanding of the status of the object, which will locate it as a reduction of the physical phenomena and the sensory operations of the perceiving subject. The works, in their individual ways, will be seen to disrupt these different orders of object formation. Resistances to objecthood will be evidenced in the refusal of bodies as the object of the spectators gaze, the displacement and re-contextualisation of static material objects, conflicts within the object of the spectators attention between organicness and inorganicness, animacy and inanimacy, and the foreground of the sensory realities of the phenomenal body.

As my discussion of the notion of temporality has already suggested, a further common feature of these works is their approach to, and problematisation of, the structures and orders of meaning within narrative. In this thesis narrative will be understood as a textual structure, within which a succession of events are held, and through which a fictional world is established and sustained. In its arrangement and binding of the very succession of events, narrative posits chains of causality, which establish particular configurations of



meaning and discourse. This fixing of meaning is also apparent in narrative's resolution of event sequences which are commonly understood to involve 'closures' of meaning-dilemmas established in the dynamics of events. Narrative will thus be understood in this thesis, as structurally embodying meaning-sets which reflect particular perspectives, values and ideologies. Further, as Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan has argued, continuities and unities of time and space are inherent to the 'proper' operation of narrative.<sup>12</sup> The temporal and spatial cohesion of the fictional worlds which narratives present is a significant factor in the maintenance of those meaning formations which narrative seeks to communicate. To disrupt these coherencies may also be to disrupt the meaning formation of the medium, and thus those formal strategies which I have so far described in relation to time and space, will also be read as breaks within the smooth mechanisms of narrative structure.

Across the different works which this thesis analyses, a resistance to the powers of narrative will be understood to take different forms. In the particular works of Forced Entertainment which I discuss the resistance is embodied in a formal fragmentation of narrative structures, where multiple atomistic narratives are employed and invoked within a single performance. As Etchells, the writer and director of Forced Entertainment argues, the company's use of fictional material is not one which entirely renounces narrative structure, but rather is concerned to extract what he terms "the force of narrative possibility".<sup>13</sup> Etchells notes two recurrent aesthetic techniques within the body of their work. The first which he terms the "minimalist" approach is one which employs an aesthetic reduction of elements similar to that of the Theatre of Mistakes, stripping, parsing, or elongating narrative structures within a performance work. The second



approach, within which the performances I discuss here could readily be classified, Etchells terms the “maximalist” approach, involving the dense multiplication of different narrative fictions within an individual performance work. The synthesis of multiple narratives within a single work problematises the verity of the structures and meanings which are presented within the micro-narratives; temporal and spatial unity, and causality are frequently disturbed. However, within these works the establishment of a fictional world is often evidently sustained as a multi-faceted and composite arrangement, informed by the differing meanings and metaphors inherent within the aggregate narratives. In a similar manner the work of Goat Island places discrete, though somewhat more sustained narrative elements, within an expansive collage structure, enabling a mingling of fictive possibilities within and around the performance act.

However, the subversive approach to narrative contained within the works I discuss, will not only be seen as a problematisation of narrative as it resides within the textual materials with which the company work, but also as a challenge to the possibility of narrative as it may rest behind, or be imposed upon, the action formations of the work. This subversion is then, one that acknowledges the presence of narrative as an indelible cultural force, an organising ‘blue-print’ within the structures of thought and the practices of reading. Just as this work recognises the inherence of narrative patterns within reception and perception, it also understands that narrative operates particular belief systems and ideologies which are integral to its structuration, and further that most cultural narratives are themselves organised in relation to transcendent meta-narratives which similarly reflect culturally and historically specific value systems. The thesis will repeatedly return to a



common feature of the works discussed: their interest in problematising narrative and meta-narrative formations. The problematisation of narrational power by these works will thus be seen as one which takes place both within the performance (as object) and within the spectator's reception of the performance. It will be argued that this approach represents both a disabling of the form of narrative within the work, and a disturbance of the spectator's ability to impose narrational orders of meaning around the work. These differing approaches to narration in performance are joined by their desire to open and question the power of narrative operations and the meanings and values they ascribe.

The resistance I have expressed to a use of 'the aesthetic' as a singular or hermetic theoretical approach, or as a set of critical categories escalated to a hierarchical position, is one which is mirrored and repeated throughout this thesis. As I will argue in more detail in Chapter Two, such a framework, associated with the theorisations and practices of Modernism, establishes 'the aesthetic' as an autonomous and self-concerned zone of activity, and would extract the aesthetic from the many cultural, philosophical and social contexts which inform its production. A number of these cultural contexts are duly explored here. The argument which this thesis presents is correspondingly eclectic in its intellectual and theoretical influences. Drawing on categories of critical practice as diverse as moral and ethical branches of philosophy, cultural studies, psychoanalysis, literary theory, phenomenology, semiology, poststructuralism, feminism, post-colonial theory, anthropology, and social theory, the thesis constructs a set of conceptual frameworks through which to explore the cultural significance of particular performance aesthetics. This use of sources proceeds from the position that there is no statute of intellectual



propriety around performance. This is of course not to argue, in a relativistic fashion, that any framework will do, but rather to assert that performance does not inherently belong to any of these disciplinary discourses, and that their place in this thesis in relation to performance is entirely dependent on the light which they shed on its dynamics.

### ***Representation and Identity***

Bringing together and re-working influences drawn from diverse disciplinary terrains this thesis will seek to explore the relationship between the representational dynamics of contemporary performance works and the charged question of the cultural formation of identity. The thesis will examine this relationship by breaking both notions into constitutive parts. Across the distinct chapters of this work key aspects of representational strategies employed in performance will be elaborated and dissected. Throughout I will ask what the formal properties of these performances are, and what effects they have on the spectator. In particular I will examine how performance itself agitates against and resists the representational structures in and through which it is perceived. The conceptual framework through which my performance analyses will take place will be one which seeks to question the nature of the 'knowing subject', its means of understanding and perception. I will examine how structures of representation and the disruptive forces of performance relate to these activities of the subject. The operations of the knowing subject will then be explored in relation to its own constitution of its Self. On the basis of this analysis a thesis on the relations of representation, performance and identity will emerge.

The anatomy of subjectivity will begin in Chapter Two, where I will explore debates within moral and ethical theory which discuss the changed cultural circumstances of subjectivity and their impact upon the question of the responsibility of the subject. This analysis will be seen to lead to a specific understanding of epistemological operations within subjectivity. A theory of ethics will be developed, drawn from distinct philosophical and critical writings on the resonances of deconstructive thought, which will be founded on *the putting into question of the subject's establishment of knowledges*. This ethical theory will be analysed in relation to its relevance to activities of readership; developed initially through the framework of the readership of texts and then subsequently in relation to the spectatorship of performance. The significance of the notion of the linguistic performative to ethical theories, models of readership and performance events will be discussed. I will argue, through an analysis of a performance work by Forced Entertainment, that specific performance aesthetics, utilising performative articulations, trouble the representational structures within which they are realised, and the discursive limitations within which the performance operates. Consequently, the performance work will be seen to enact a challenge to the spectator. The dynamics of this challenge will initially be explored in terms of the disruption of what I shall term 'the habitual economies of the Self'; the subject's routine practices of epistemic exclusion and reduction in relation to the 'Other'. Here the notion of the Other will be understood as that meaning which representation, language, and discourse fail to articulate or present. Through their challenge to the subject's epistemic practices, performance subversions of representational



structures will be seen as central to the creation of an ethical experience of alterity for the spectating subject.

Whilst this analysis will be shown to provide a particular model of the epistemic operations of the subject, and its relationship to representational structures, the notion of the opening of the subject and of representation to the Other in this Chapter falls short of a full articulation of the cultural and political significance of this profoundly troubling movement. Broadening the cultural address of my analysis, in Chapter Three I will examine the possibilities of this putting into question of the knowing subject and representational structures in relation to the specific alterity of death. Through readings of the dynamics of social and cultural denials and accommodations of the force of death, I will outline death's impact upon the epistemic practices of the subject. Here the alterity of death will be seen as a force which threatens the very constitution and normative operation of subjectivity. This address to what I will term the 'significant alterity' of death, will be seen as one which ties its author into a charged relation with performance and necessitates the adoption of a more personalised form of writing. Through examinations of the aesthetics of performance works by Stephen Taylor Woodrow and Goat Island, the means through which performance may come to question the cultural and representational logics of the exclusion of death's force, will be identified. The analysis of the effects upon the spectator, of these unsettling performance works, will then be extended through a parallel with the psychic dynamics of trauma.

Whilst the thesis, up to this point, will have elaborated a theory of the epistemic operations of the subject, it will become apparent that no adequate analysis of the relationship between subjectivity, representation and identity could be made without an examination of the physical and sensory operations of the subject. In seeking to explore these phenomenal dynamics, the thesis will outline the ways in which the experience of the 'lived body' (a term drawn from the science of phenomenology) is actively excluded from the subject's cognitive activities. Through an interrogation of the dynamics and differences of linguistic and phenomenological theories of the body, the habitual economies of the Self will be seen to be dependent upon a reduction of the subject's own phenomenal realities to the orders of language. An aporetic relation between the subject and its own body is thus elaborated as an inevitable condition of subjectivity. The historical, cultural, and discursive structures which inform and order this denigration of the sensory body will be elaborated. Growing from these analyses the thesis will explore the means through which particular performance aesthetics within the work of Forced Entertainment may be seen to bring the reductions of sensory experience to the orders of language into relief, making evident the mechanisms and limits of this cognitive operation for the spectating subject. In this respect, the thesis elaborates another aspect of the operations of the knowing subject, its relation to representational structures, and the means through which both may be brought into question by performance.

Through these varying examinations of the epistemic and experiential operations and practices of subjectivity, whether in relation to a general linguistic alterity, or the specific alterities of death and the lived body, a model of subjectivity will have emerged which is



predicated on stabilising and exclusionary epistemological practices. Within the realms of the understanding and perception of the artwork, these practices are lent credence and security by representational structures which, as de Certeau has argued, similarly delimit and spatialise what is known. Within each chapter, the capacity of performance to trouble the subject and representation, and the forms through which this perturbation takes place, will have been articulated. Having outlined constitutive elements of the operations of subjectivity, in Chapter Five I will turn finally towards the means through which the subject may attempt to create for itself, a sense of Self. Working through the theories of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, a model of the discursive production of identity will emerge, in which the subject is seen as both compliant and resistive to discourses of power. However, the specific model advanced here will be one which differs radically from both the social / cultural constructionist and essentialist models within which the debates around identity have commonly been conducted. Specific influences from feminist and post-colonial theory will enable an analysis of the dynamics of aggregates of identity (particularly sex, gender and ethnicity), those categories of self-knowledge by which the subject is often constituted as hermetic and unitary. The function and service of these categories of identity in relation to particular normative and oppressive cultural discourses will be discussed. Again, the structures of representation will be seen as the means through which knowledge may be constituted, and here as the means through which the subject may be formed as a static, replete and firm identity. Through discussions of the work of Gordana Stanasic and *Forced Entertainment*, performance will again be seen to bring into question the coherence and integrity of representational orders which might secure identity. In this thesis then, an examination of the dynamics of performance works

will be used to present a theory of performance which argues for its capacity to problematise oppressive powers which, through identity formation, seek to control and shape the subject. This radical ability of performance will then be presented as a force which can subversively destabilise and disarticulate identity.



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<sup>1</sup> Michel de Certeau, 'The Scriptural Economy', *The Practice of Everyday Life*, UCP, 1984: 131-153.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*: 36.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*: 18-24.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*: 29-43.

<sup>5</sup> Ana Sanchez-Colberg, 'Altered States and Subliminal Spaces: Charting the Road Towards a Physical Theatre', *Performance Research*, 1(2), Routledge, 1996: 40-56.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Etchells, unpublished interview with the author, September, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Fiona Templeton and Anthony Howell, *Elements of Performance Art: Theory / Exercises*, Ting Books, 1976.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Kirby, 'Acting and Not-Acting', *A Formalist Theatre*, UPP, 1987: 3-20.

<sup>9</sup> Marvin Carlson, 'Semiotics and Nonsemiotics in Performance', *Theatre Semiotics*, IUP, 1990.

<sup>10</sup> De Certeau: 115-130.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*: 117.

<sup>12</sup> Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, Routledge, 1983.

<sup>13</sup> Tim Etchells, unpublished interview with the author, September, 1995.

## 2. The Ethics of Performance: Aesthetics, Ontology and Alterity<sup>1</sup>

How can you live when you've done something?  
How can you live when you've seen something?<sup>2</sup>

Buried within the inventory structure of the text, these two lines from Forced Entertainment's performance *Emmanuelle Enchanted*, may well have slid past the conscious attentions of some of the spectators of this piece, perhaps for them the words falling in impact and meaning through their place within a listing which potentially renders its many articulations relative in weight. Yet for me there is an instant wounding in the provocation of these strangely blunt and vague expressions. These lines have been haunting me since I heard them, not least because they seem to me to be questions that neither I, nor the piece, can answer, but questions which we both in our own ways, desperately long to resolve. Beyond their immediate performance context, these questions open out an interpretive ground which gives access not only to the meanings of this piece, not only to the body of work of this particular company, but to the cultural value of the performance practices with which this thesis is concerned.

How can you *live* when you've done something? How can you *live* when you've seen something? Said in this way, it is perhaps not so much the insistent "how" which perturbs me now, each "how" holding its own discrete question, somewhat dulled by the individual limitations of its clause. No, I am bothered more by the inherent equation in these lines, made by the slight modification within repetition, *slipping from action to sight*, which seems to suggest that for the subject ("you") both action and sight - regardless of the



specificities of their location (“something”) - impose a certain *responsibility*: they call to question the propriety of the practice of living. This responsibility is given a powerful fatefulness in the nameless inevitable “something”, slashing down any hope of doing or seeing outside of its peremptory call. What’s more these possibilities seem to hang over their own erasure through the potential of the question’s rhetorical slant (“How *can* you live ...”), an attitude which would relieve the question of its address to the present, and suggest an utter nihilism; that there is of course no living in any positive sense, because living has somehow always been corrupted or emptied out, before it can truly begin, by action and sight. These are the questions within the questions which dog me now. How is it possible to say that we are as responsible for every experience that we witness in the world as we are for every act that we commit? What does it mean to assert that this responsibility is not simply a matter of choice, but a duty which is given by our very existence, our very relation to things in the world? Is it true to say that the project of living well, living in a more than mechanistic sense, living in pleasure - which would seem to be the quest of the question - might never be possible because of the nature and consequences of acting and seeing? And what, if anything, might these notions have to do with performance?

### ***Declining Morality and the Contemporary Subject***

‘How to live?’ is of course, not a new question; it has been asked within shifting moral and ethical philosophies since the inauguration of philosophy itself. But if many contemporary cultural commentators are to be believed, the theoretical service in which this question has

been traditionally pressed, the establishment of moral laws and codes, has fallen into a terminal decline.<sup>3</sup> The philosophical exploration (and cultural operation) of unconditionally acceptable basic laws which should govern our interaction with others, epitomise our humanity, and enshrine and enable our general freedom, has foundered against new discursive realisations and changed cultural conditions. The contemporary destabilisation of moral law can be persuasively located as part of the collapse of the Rationalist and Modernist projects and can also be seen as a correlate of Jean-Francois Lyotard's highly influential diagnosis of the prevalent cultural condition of incredulity towards metanarratives.<sup>4</sup> Each of these related discourses on present cultural conditions has been extensively discussed within philosophical and critical theory. It is not the project of this thesis to provide a detailed analysis of these theories in relation to their general historical accuracy or their broad cultural validity, as these questions have been admirably and exhaustively addressed by many others, however, I wish to examine their impact on the cultural value of moral and ethical theories as a means of opening questions around the ethical content of performance.<sup>5</sup>

Both the Rationalist and the Modernist projects have been interrogated in relationship to their formulation and dependency on now doubtful models of subjectivity. The contemporary crisis of morality can be seen as a consequence of the cultural and theoretical problematisation of its basis within foundational, universal and ahistorical notions of the human subject and the way in which this basis is used to generate a certain set of laws whose jurisdiction, imperatives and constitutive values are consequently seen as unquestionable. For instance, Richard Shusterman notes in his *Pragmatist Aesthetics*,



that both Aristotle's ethics, with its unscrutinized goal of a general pleasure or happiness, and Kant's ethics with its commitment to rational thought as a means of solving ethical dilemmas, have sought to ground the ethical in a notion of "essential human nature", the provenance of which is now radically called into question. In a broad array of philosophical and critical texts, the notion of an essential, universal and transhistorical human subject has been irredeemably critiqued and superseded by theorisations of subjectivity which recognise its linguistic and cultural construction within historical and material specificities. Consequently the general human innateness of the inclinations on which the old moral theories were built (for instance the naturalisation of the aim of pleasure, or the necessity to consciousness of the exercise of a rational duty within 'free choice') has come to be seen as a discursive construction in the service of particular ideological projects.

Recent understandings of the way in which the human subject is indelibly marked by specific discourses of power and by cultural difference have threatened the validity of any code of human practice which fails to account for their operation. In fact the universalism inherent within moral law and its potential complicity within such discourses of power have rendered it potentially oppressive in its failure to meet cultural specificities and in its evident objective of the discursive control of the subject. The certainty and inexhaustibility inherent in older philosophies of moral law have also been subjected to a disabling attack. The obligational content of moral law with its non-specific imposition is now seen by many commentators as theoretically and socially undesirable and ultimately self-defeating. Universal obligations inevitably fail to recognise an array of aspects of



psychological motivation in the field of human action which may not be encompassed or described by the terms morality lays down. The absolutism of the obligational cannot allow for the condition of ambivalence in which many such actions are manifested. Here again, moral law is seen to assume the ideality (and possibility) of a coherent and unified subject, a true-self who acts in the world without experiencing internal contradiction. Moreover, the generality of such obligations often falls in the specificity of situations, leading in turn to a disbelief in their transvaluation and unquestionable authority. As Zygmunt Bauman notes, Modernity's quest for moral law, believed that such law *was attainable* and that human logic would necessarily, in the fullness of time, produce certain solutions to human dilemmas around right and proper action. For Bauman, "the moral thought and practice of modernity was animated by the belief in the possibility of a non-ambivalent, non-aporetic ethical code".<sup>6</sup> As such this thought and practice can be seen as part of Modernity's omnipresent meta-narrative of human progress and displays a dependency on rational thought with its unquestioned belief in the subject's logical processes as necessarily yielding solutions which are somehow objectively verifiable and true.

Most importantly, the collapse of the philosophical purchase of moral law can be seen as a correlate of the dissolution of autonomy and boundarised distinction within areas of human thought and practice, which was such an integral aspect of Modernist traditions. In these traditions, clearly identified art forms were seen as being involved in a search for that which separated and distinguished them from other forms. Thus particular Modernist art forms, as closed disciplinary sectors, were turned towards *the uncovering of their own*



*essence*, and within this logic any potential intermingling of forms came to be seen as a 'violation' and diminution of the general aesthetic project. As Nick Kaye has noted, this was a "corruption" epitomised by 'the theatrical' in seminal Modernist theorisations such as those of Michael Fried.<sup>7</sup> But beyond these specific conceptions of individuated forms, Modernism's vision of 'the aesthetic' itself was similarly *categorical*: a pure and autonomous terrain of human thought and practice, historically pressed towards the discovery of its own founding rules, distinct from the sullyng concerns of the quotidian, and unimpinged by questions of context-value. This notion of aesthetic purism came to be challenged by the unveiling of the complicity of the artist(s), the spectating subject(s), and the contexts of exhibition, within the meaning and cultural value of the artwork. Consequently the artwork lost, and still remains without, its immunity from the politics of representation. In the wider cultural sphere, it is now possible to see that broad areas of social activity involve the complex trappings of aesthetic practices. As such the aesthetic has come to be understood, not as a purified realm, but as an expanded field: the quotidian has in effect been aestheticised, and with it those domains of human thought and practice - such as politics and ethics - which had previously been held at a reified distance. Whilst the nature and effects of this aestheticisation of social and cultural space have been discussed widely in critical theory, one of the most significant features of this shift is its impact on the question of ethical theory.<sup>8</sup>

Most significantly, in relation to the question of the ethical content of performance addressed here, the evaluative processes of the aesthetic have come to be seen as less easily separable from the evaluative processes which occupy the subject in everyday



encounters. Just as the question of the cultural value of aesthetic judgements can no longer be answered through the self-authorising terms of 'the aesthetic', but instead is seen as being dependent on political, social and cultural contexts, in turn, conscious decision making processes within everyday life are seen to involve 'ways of seeing' and doing, a conceptualisation which implies the operation of more or less freely chosen, subjectively wrought perspectives, in the manner of the artist.<sup>9</sup> In *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, Shusterman comprehensively argues that the two previously distinct categories of theorisation, evaluation and practice - 'the aesthetic' and 'the ethical' - can no longer be held apart. In a passage that is worthwhile quoting at length, this dissolution of distinction is related to the subject's evaluative practices.

Finding *what is right* becomes a matter of finding the most fitting and appealing gestalt, of perceiving the most attractive and harmonious constellation of various and variously weighted features in a given situation or life. It is no longer the deduction of one obligation from another more general obligation or group of obligations; *nor is it the outcome of a logical calculation* based on a clear hierarchical order of obligations. Likewise ethical justification comes to resemble aesthetic explanation in appealing not to syllogism or algorithm but to *perceptually persuasive argument* in its attempt to [...] convince. Such justification relies on and aims to sustain and extend some basic consensus [...] on the bounds of appropriate action, yet also recognizes and serves to promote *a tolerance of difference* of perception or taste within these (revisable) bounds. As with aesthetic interpretation and evaluation, we want our friends and associates to understand our ethical perspectives and choices and to see them as reasonable; but no longer is it so crucial that they accept them as *universally right and valid for all*. Ethical judgements can no more be demonstratively proved categorically true through unexceptionable principles than can aesthetic ones. For ethical decisions, like artistic ones, should not be the outcome of the strict application of rules *but the product of creative and critical imagination*. Ethics and aesthetics become one in this meaningful sense; and the project of an ethical life becomes an exercise in living aesthetically. [my italics]<sup>10</sup>



Whilst Shusterman's framework around the search for "what is right", based on a notion of a longed-for aesthetic state (modelled on classical definitions of beauty) as an organic entity containing "an optimal balance of unity in variety", is somewhat problematic in its invocation of wholeness as an attainable ethical goal, his comparison of similarities between ethical and aesthetic decision making practices is highly pertinent here.<sup>11</sup>

Acknowledging the redundancy of general moral imperatives in relation to an ethical decision making process, and the difficulty of maintaining rational goals within these thought processes, Shusterman's statement reveals the dependency of both aesthetic and ethical reasoning on fictionalisation, the imaginative projection / staging of versions or rhetorics which convey a suitably convincing rendition of the decision.<sup>12</sup> He also notes the contingent and relative nature of such evaluative processes and products, the need to retain these evaluations unresolved as law, and perpetually open to the differences which they exclude. The ethical and the aesthetic decision-making process is consequently seen as being freed from the absolute and finite categories of right / wrong, pleasant / unpleasant, truthhood / falsehood. As such, Shusterman begins to layout some of the dynamics of what might loosely be termed a post-moral ethical code. I will shortly return to these questions of the properties of ethical decision making and ethical encounter through a somewhat different frame, but here it is important to note that in these reconceptions of ethical decision-making, in which the boundaries of the previously distinct terrains of ethical and aesthetic theory are dissolved, the application and general validity of moral law is seen as profoundly insufficient.<sup>13</sup>



The slippage inherent in Forced Entertainment's equation of responsibility across both action and sight, and the shift that it represents, away from the concentration of ethics on the realm of deeds to the realm of general experience, can also be seen in the light of contemporary cultural conditions in which there is a serious instability in the status of moral law. Within these cultural conditions previously stable and direct notions of choice, agency and affect have been radically undermined. Notions of the subject which supposed a freedom of will and action within moral constraints, have been problematised through the realisation of the insidious nature of power, and its ineradicable discursive limitation of the subject's thoughts and deeds. Choice does not take place in an open field without implication for others but is bounded by, and itself operates through, power. Further, the contemporary cultural context is one in which an instrumental notion of agency is problematised since we are increasingly aware of the discrepancies between human intentions and effects. As Bauman argues,

we live and act in the company of [an] apparently endless multitude of other human beings, seen or guessed, known and unknown, whose life and actions depend on what we do and in turn influence what we do, what we can do and what we ought to do - and all this in ways we neither understand nor are able to presage.<sup>14</sup>

In this context, human relations, and consequently human actions, are extensively mediated. The close realm of consequence which once surrounded the individual, and encompassed their personal choices, is dissolved. Consequences of individual actions made on the basis of decisions are not necessarily visible or necessarily instantly manifested. As Bauman remarks, in the field of human relations, "between the deeds and their outcomes there is a huge *distance* - both in time and space - which we cannot fathom



using our innate, ordinary powers of perception”.<sup>15</sup> Thus the assessment of consequences, through which any ethical decision must take place, becomes a highly complex task.

Moreover, as human relations are extensively mediated, a purified notion of a deed as a physical action is unsustainable; deeds take place in non-immediate circumstances and may be more or less physical. Actions of significant consequence for the subject are not always witnessed in an embodied immediacy but instead filter through the informational mesh surrounding the subject. Within a social context where individuals have wide powers over other individuals, and in which the relation between intention and effect is unstable, good intention is no guarantee against a harmful effect (a fact which indicates the further redundancy of the absolute categories of the moral). The entire field of human culture is a charged zone of consequences in relation to the welfare of others within which the individual is deeply implicated, but for which, the individual is not solely responsible. The subject, as Forced Entertainment suggest, may be equally as implicated by the ‘inactive’ witnessing of an event, as they are by an event in which they have played a ‘direct’ active physical role. In this context, as Bauman puts it, “responsibility floats”.<sup>16</sup> However, as Forced Entertainment’s wounding question suggests, responsibility towards others remains an urgent necessity. Whilst responsibility may float in the de-personalised spaces of contemporary culture and in the erosion of an implicatory difference between action and sight, the question of how to live responsibly, both personally and socially, still remains. In this performance statement, as in the fields of performance and cultural production, an ethical imperative still presses against the matter of the subject’s thoughts, deeds and experiences.



Furthermore, the notion that social deeds (whether ‘morally appropriate’ or not) should and do emerge from ‘fully constituted’ knowing subjects is somewhat problematic. This notion is common, for example, to many critical theorists who have attacked the political and ethical content of deconstructive analyses. In effect these critiques often suppose a particular understanding of the subject and of subjectivity as a pre-condition of their constitution of ‘the political’ and ‘the ethical’; an assumption that is highly questionable. In Terry Eagleton’s dismissal of the political force of deconstructive thought for instance, he asserts that deconstruction “provides you with all the risks of a radical politics while cancelling the subject who might be summoned to become an agent of them”.<sup>17</sup> Here any possibility of political agency is seen as emerging exclusively from a secure and unquestionable subjectivity. In her discussion of the project of feminist politics informed by key tenets of poststructuralist theory, Judith Butler questions what she sees as a fundamental and unexamined supposition of foundationalist political theories such as those of Eagleton, that “politics requires a subject, needs from the start to presume its subject”.<sup>18</sup> Butler argues that the assertion of the necessity of a stable subject in such theories is a foreclosing determination on the realms of the political, precluding other models of politically informed and active subjectivity. Subsequently she elaborates, here and elsewhere, theorisations of political and ethical relations which are not dependent on the locus of a coherent subject; most significantly such theories involve models of cognition and human agency which arise from a subject “position in which self-understanding is not necessarily complete or possible”.<sup>19</sup> As such, political and ethical relation is seen as arising within *the putting into question of the knowing subject*.



In the coming passages I will make a parallel argument around the manifestation of an ethical relation involving the putting into question of the spectator-as-knowing-subject within the performance event. However, the terrain in which Butler seeks to articulate the efficacy of this questioned knowing subject is critical theory. Thus Butler is able to add her voice to those who defend the political significance of deconstructive thought by arguing that a theorisation of the political should not arise from some supposed position outside of “the play of power”, but should instead seek to understand the way in which, in its very articulation, any theory of politics is itself caught up in the discursive fields of power. In this embroilment any putative political theory operates its own exclusions which may have violent and oppressive implications. For Butler, a political theory which is turned, in a deconstructive mode, towards its own violent exclusions, brings into question the stability and authority of the “theorizing subject”.<sup>20</sup> Butler’s commitment to the political potential of deconstructive thought thus leads her to a model of subjectivity in which political efficacy is a correlate of contingency within the subject’s operative epistemological foundations. The significance of this understanding for moral theory is that the possibility of ethical action may emerge within a similar model of subjectivity. As Caruth asserts in her formulation on the relationship between the subject’s thought and its deeds, “the demand for a responsible action arises most urgently in the impossibility of a pregiven self-understanding or knowledge”.<sup>21</sup> I will soon outline in more detail the ways in which a theory of ethics may be predicated on such challenges to the epistemological stability of the subject.

Butler is also keen to establish that for the subject the relationship between intention and action is never one in which there is a straightforward and satisfactory realisation, an outcome which would lead to an affirmation of the powers and integrity of subjecthood. This understanding severely problematises the basis upon which moral law has conceived moral thoughts, actions and consequences. Butler seeks to interrogate and eschew those understandings of political agency which conform to a smooth instrumental logic, instead positing and exemplifying the ways in which, within cultural and political fields, action and its consequences always exceed the subject's intentions. 'Moral action' could be said to follow a similarly errant course. It is the recognition of the frequent proliferation of consequences far in excess of the subject's intentions and / or the acknowledgement of the gaps between intention, action and result which "challenge the rational transparency of that subject's intentionality, and so [...] subvert the very definition of the subject itself".<sup>22</sup> In this way Butler's theorisations are specifically turned towards an interrogation of the foundational concepts which have for so long underpinned moral discourse: the inalienable and certain chain of subjectivity, knowledge and agency.

### ***Articulating Ethics in Morality's Wake***

As the arguments of Butler, Shusterman and Bauman suggest, the collapse of moral law is closely connected to these shifts in understanding of the contemporary subject; its social constitution and the relation between its thoughts and actions. Such changes in morality and subjectivity have significant implications for art practice, its cultural impact and its



criticism. It might seem to follow logically that art practices that exemplify or embody these instabilities of moral law and / or these revised understandings of subjectivity, would have little to say on the question of personal and social responsibility. I believe that this is not necessarily the case in relation to many contemporary art practices and I will argue in this thesis that this reading, as it might be applied to contemporary performance practices, ignores an urgent ethical imperative, presaged in those memorable lines from *Emanuelle Enchanted*, and resident within the aesthetics of certain contemporary performance works. My analysis of the aesthetics of performance works will focus on processes of thought, evaluation, and qualities of encounter for the acting and spectating subjects which can be said to occur both within the experience of the aesthetic and through an ethical orientation. In this analysis the ethical and the aesthetic are not held as discrete realms. Following the collapse of the validity of moral law, the ethical orientation of this work needs to be radically distinguished from the notion of art exemplifying moral concerns, or enacting some form of moral experience. In this respect I will delineate dynamics of an ethical imperative in a particular performance work which operates on the spectators of this work without enacting the problematic dynamics of moral law as it would be illustrated or experienced in art practice. Specific aesthetic formations will later be identified which condition the spectator's ethical experience within the work. Identified and analysed through its occurrence in a particular performance work, this imperative is one which will be seen to occur within the present time experience of the witnessing of the performance event. The ethicality of this witnessing will be seen to emerge principally through the opening of knowledges presented within the event and a corresponding dilation of the cognitive limitations of the spectating subject.

Most significantly here, the ethical relation which I will present as inherent within the witnessing of the performance event is one that cannot be extended to universally applicable general laws. This relation is not one that is easily re-inscribed into imposing codes which would seek to determine, control and restrict the behaviour of the subject. The relation on which the ethical experience is predicated is not definable in terms of finite or absolute categories; the relation is not rigid, but is conditional, provisional and characterised by flux. The model of ethics to which this relation belongs does not perceive moral law as a philosophically sustainable project (the dream of the Modern and the Rational) or indeed as practically maintainable, yet at the same time, it does not hide from *the need* for social and personal codes of conduct, inscribing such codes as *necessary but unattainable objects of its quest*. Rather than establishing laws which would fail in the complexity of realities, the model of ethics in which this relation occurs repeatedly marks the failure of the subject in the face of an unanswerable responsibility, whilst imploring the subject to overcome this failure. The experience is not then resolvable into unquestionable principles or codes, but is instead turned towards such principles as *impossible goals*, doubting their validity and at the same time ethically pressing the subject towards them in ways the subject may not be able to meet.

Nor could this ethical experience be said to be one which is granted by the narrative messages or structures of the work, in the way in which a reader / spectator might experience moral lessons embodied within the narrative consequences of a text / performance. The ethics of this work does not occur as a practice learnt through literary



or theatrical example, through the cultural manifestations of moral law. On the contrary, it emerges within the event of spectatorship (not after it) and by the putting into question of the knowledges (moral or otherwise) which the text / work narrates and thus seeks to make sovereign. The subject is not assumed to be inclined towards moral or immoral behaviour, but is merely seen as being inclined towards the establishment of knowledges as the basis upon which to conduct actions; a proclivity and consequentiality which this ethics seeks to perturb. In fact the ethical experience will be seen to appear as a contestation of all that is self-stabilising within the imaginative and intellectual economies of the subject. It arises as a disruption of the subject's habitual tendencies of thought and action, and as a challenge to the cognitive operations and resolutions which the subject pragmatically seeks to impose. In this respect, it exemplifies an ethicality which falls outside of the terms of rational thought, since it is not the product of a mental calculation, a conclusion of knowledge, but the opening of the very terms and processes by which such rationalisations may be made. Nor could the ethics to which this ethical experience belongs be said to embody a eudaemonic project, in the sense that whilst it constantly seeks the dissolution of the subject's knowledges, it recognises an inevitable reduction and violence in the way in which the subject understands and encounters others. It does not assume a purity of motive in human actions and relations, but instead suggests their ineradicable ambivalence; since it supposes an epistemology of the subject which is simultaneously exclusionary and inclusive, cruel and kind and hence irreducible to the simple moral binaries of pleasure and pain, truthhood and falsehood, goodness and evil.

The human subject envisaged and figured by this ethics is a specific discursive construction; it is produced by the discourse environment which it inhabits and, in turn, appropriates and re-produces. This discourse environment - circumscribed by language - marks the cognitive limits of the subject, its intellectual and imaginative boundaries, and conditions its every encounter. All social interaction between subject-players proceeds through such limits, and relations with others are negotiated through the institution and dissolution of knowledges at and in this interface. For this theory of ethics then, the conscious accommodations and decisions which subjects make cannot be said to be properly ethical, since they close on the alterity (of other people, or more precisely what they represent, other thoughts and understandings) with which they are engaged. As I shall shortly argue in more detail, it is in the constant opening of such cognitive reductions that the subject's ethical experience arises. As such this theory does not propose a proper subject to whom ethical behaviour can *belong*, since this ethicality is constituted through the dissolution of the subject into what it is not. Ethical behaviour in this sense is never resident within a subject, or practically maintainable as the constant life-project of a subject, but emerges instead through the momentary self-losses of an inclination.

Furthermore, since there is an insurmountable gap between the subject's intentions and effects a purified notion of ethical behaviour becomes problematic. The actions which the subject takes in relation to others will never properly or truly enact the subject's intention, however morally, ethically or altruistically motivated. In fact this ethical theory brings into question any programme of behaviour based on a transparent and direct chain between intention and effect or knowledge and action. This is a project for ethical action, contrary



to Eagleton's assertion, which breaks from the notion that the subject must first know its own mind in order to act appropriately and with success. The ethical experience does not emerge in the formulation of what is known and the realisation of consequential activities. On the contrary, it emerges through the disassembling of the subject's security in knowledge. It is only by this disassembly that the possibility of an ethical act arises. The ethical act itself always remains as a possibility, since again, any actions which result from the ethical experience, though they may bare traces of an 'ethical origin', cannot be said to be properly ethical, as they inevitably exceed their impetus and embody their own cognitive limitations. In this context the theory of ethics outlined here does not formulate a programme of behaviour, since it could not guarantee its success, but instead establishes an *operational goal*.

In contrast to the dynamics of 'moral experience', the ethical experience of which this theory speaks is not one which is generalisable in the sense that it has occurred in the same way, or will occur in the same way, across history, but is historically specific; in its shape and condition it is subject to the discursive limitations of the time. The ethical experience which I will examine also takes place within the particular discursive limitations of the cultural context in which it exists; it is marked by metaphoric, mythological and ideological formations, bounded by the *habitus*, the localities of place and culture in which such notions circulate. In particular these cultural discourses are heavily inflected by notions of gender, sexuality, race, and nationality. The subject who is figured within this experience is inscribed by and within these discourses, and as such their imaginative and intellectual boundaries and 'blindnesses' are determined and prescribed by them. This

ethical experience is not then an experience which can be said to be *essentially* human, in the sense that it is generated by subjects whose nature it is inherently and immutably resident within.

Within the realms of aesthetic creation, this ethics offers a way of practicing art, which is conscious of (some of) its discursive exclusions, which is inclined towards that understanding which its very own forms have not yet reached. In the witnessing of these works the spectator is offered a similar cognitive dilation. As I will soon make apparent, the performance event is at the heart of this ethical dynamic. In this respect Forced Entertainment's invocation of *the* ethical question of 'How to live?' within performance, emerges as a self-reflexive question, a question which is actively performed within the work, a question which their work itself seeks to answer. In staging this question, the performance work which I shall discuss here could perhaps be said to offer access to a way of being in relation to the other that provides an operative goal for social action, but a way of being which certainly is not prescribed in the terms of a moral law. Always context specific, this way of being, is one that is conscious of the limits of consciousness and embodies a duty towards the recession of epistemological limits in pursuit of an encounter with their Other.

My examination of the ethical imperative operative within certain performance aesthetics will initially proceed through an examination of discourses on a related imperative within deconstructive thought. I advance this comparison, not in order to assume that contemporary performance practices in some way neatly exemplify the critical practice of



deconstruction, but to open the question of the correspondence between deconstruction and performance, in order to identify certain aesthetic practices which enact features which are common to deconstructive thought: particularly an attitude towards epistemological limits and an ethical relation to alterity. Although this bringing together of deconstruction and contemporary performance is not new (it occurs across a number of very recent critical and performance theory texts) the emphasis within these theories on the ethicality of this relation has not been substantially made. Further, I would argue that some of these texts move too swiftly towards a smooth equation of these distinctive critical and performance practices, in the process eliding their differences and thereby enacting a classical reduction of performance to the ‘scriptural economies’ of criticism.<sup>23</sup>

These questions of the ethical content of performance are elucidated by a discussion of two recent works in which ethics becomes a recharged conceptual horizon, or is sited and excavated as the under-addressed revaluating terrain of deconstructive thought. Simon Critchley’s *The Ethics of Deconstruction* and J. Hillis Miller’s *The Ethics of Reading* are informative responses to the accusations made against deconstructive thought (particularly that of de Man and Derrida) that it is socially and politically irresponsible and tends towards a genre of “nihilistic textual freeplay”.<sup>24</sup> My intention is to produce a reading that interlaces and re-works ideas from these two texts without reducing their differences and consigning them to some unified version of an ethics. Between these two texts I hope to construct a set of aspects; interconnecting thoughts which will then be brought to bare on a specific performance work. This is not to suggest that this performance work is some kind of exemplary staging or hermetic encasing of a narrative turn within deconstructive

thought, but rather, to elicit conceptual synchronicities which illuminate the interior logics of the aesthetics of this work. In locating an ethical dynamic within this piece I am asserting, in a manner similar to the defence of deconstruction, the presence of a critical, personal, cultural and social value within the performance.

### ***The Ethics of Reading***

In his *Ethics of Reading*, Miller stages an intricate deconstruction of Kant's treatise on morality troubling the universal foundations upon which this work is based. In particular Miller seeks to interrogate and undermine the notions of the objective existence of moral law and the subjective condition of respect for that law.<sup>25</sup> Miller uncovers contradiction at the heart of Kant's assertions that ethics is *founded* on respect for moral law. He shows that Kant's concept of respect is torn between an idea of respect instituted by the law and imposed on the subject and respect as a subjectively formed and self-wrought feeling. If subjects cannot know whether respect is something that is a passive response emerging from an external imposition or something that subjects themselves author and create, how can this notion of respect operate functionally? If, as Miller asserts deconstructing Kant, respect cannot be resolved as one or the other of these things, what is the status of the object of the subject's respect, moral law, and how can it then be defined, approached or faced? It would seem that moral law cannot simply and objectively exist - since its associated operation is neither one constituted through imposition, nor is it solely a production of the subject - it must therefore be exemplified in order that respect for it may unproblematically arise. Miller confirms then that moral law can only be confronted



through an exemplary intermediary, for Kant a person, or for Miller, a text. Because such law can only ever be exemplified (personified or textually inscribed), it is always experienced through synecdoche, a standing in for the whole which is utterly figurative. Miller contends then that the moral law which would inform the subject is always unattainable and elsewhere; it can never be truly found, but can only be approached through a medium, which necessarily involves its narration. As Miller puts it, “There is no theory of ethics [...] without storytelling”.<sup>26</sup> Miller notes Kant’s ambivalence towards, and marginalisation of, the place of narrative in his account of moral law, an ambivalence which arises, he maintains, because narrative intervenes in the subject’s experience of moral law and indeed within the very process of making an ethical decision. Thus Miller figures textual production, whether philosophical, poetic or fictional (and here I would add theatrical, though Miller does not specifically address this mode of textuality), as integral to the attainment of an ethical experience and consequently as a region of ethical significance.

In the readership of texts it would seem, as well as in ethics and the theatre, the knowledge which the subject most urgently requires is the knowledge of *how to act*. How does the reading subject form such a knowledge and make an ethical decision? Significantly, fiction emerges as an intrinsic feature of decision making within Miller’s ethics. Following Kant he asserts that to be able to make an ethical decision around an action a subject must ask itself what would happen if the “private maxim” were to become a general rule. The subject thus narrates the future of their decision; posits a fictional ‘as if’. The ‘as if’ is the test of feasibility that an ethical thought must undergo. The

particular is extended 'as if' it were universal, as a bridge between the private and public realms, between the specific case and wider societal rules, between the immediate world of choices and actions and a putative world. Thus the function of readership of fictional material for the subject becomes apparent. The subject requires an imaginative production to enable an ethical decision. The fictional, and within that category the particular 'as if' that is the theatre, can take on a facilitative power in an ethical decision.

However, through a close deconstruction of one of Kant's examples of such imaginary projections Miller discovers that the kind of fictionalisation which ethics requires is best understood through the figure of the promise. Thus Miller's ethical 'as if' is not simply any fiction. The ethical 'as if', in the mode of the promise, will be a speculative act without instant verification. It is not possible to know whether the promise will ever be fulfilled, the 'as if' transformed into a universal law. Miller remarks then that the 'as if' which enables ethics, the text within which a subject might be ethically engaged, is a linguistic performative, an articulation which enacts the meaning that it signifies.<sup>27</sup> Thus Miller ties ethics to a particular version of fictionalisation and statement. The promissory form of these fictions and statements, allied with the dynamics of the performative speech act, suggests that the meanings which they advance cannot be assured or categorically proven. This then is a model of fictionalisation and statement which does not suppose a pure or smooth transfer of human intention into effect. In the performative act the author or speaker's intention cannot be guaranteed. As Miller notes, "A performative makes something happen, but, it may be, whether or not it makes happen what it says will happen or intends will happen can never be known for certain."<sup>28</sup> It is also important here to note



that such fictions and statements and the meanings they assert are specifically temporalised; in the mode of the promise, they belong to the unreproducible now of the present articulation. The promise is built on a deferral of its validation, which can only happen in some future time. As I will soon elaborate, this equation of ethicality with a promissory form is one which locks the tempo of Miller's ethics into the present moment of reading.

Miller's interest turns towards those examples of textual production which contain within them some form of promissory structure, as a means of exemplifying the ethicality of such texts. Formally he asserts that this ethicality is manifested in the mounting of narratives which promise resolution and fulfillment of moral dilemmas, a promise which the narratives themselves never realise. Such texts do not bring their readers into contact with an experience of moral law, but rather embody *another law* which Miller identifies, following de Man as the "unreadability of the text."<sup>29</sup> The texts embody this law of unreadability since, despite their promise, they do not attain moral law, but instead inscribe the unattainability of this law within their quest for it. Miller expands on this notion of the law of the unreadability of the text by asserting that it is a rule to which all texts without exception are subject. The duty imposed through an ethical text is not an order to believe in the text presented to the reader as if it were a true representation. It is rather a "fidelity to the law to which the text itself is subject", the law of a text's unreadability. This law could perhaps be rephrased as the general law of the failure of all representation.<sup>30</sup> A representation is unreadable in that it fails to fix and hold that to which it refers (the real, the signified, its object of attention), and most importantly, in de Man's words, "language

is unable to control the recurrence *in its reading* as well as in itself, of the errors it exposes”.<sup>31</sup> In reading the always erroneous representation, I the reader, am forced to repeat the error of language. The epistemological dimension of reading takes place “against the grain of the author’s and the reader’s wishes”. For Miller this means that to attempt to know through reading is to be “forced to re-enact once more the necessity of getting it wrong.”<sup>32</sup>

Miller locates this encounter with the law of the unreadability of the text as one which is acutely present within specific textual forms of self-reading. Miller contends that it is here, particularly here,

at such moments an author turns back on himself, so to speak, turns back on a text he or she has written, re-reads it, and, it may be, performs an act which can be called an example of the ethics of reading.<sup>33</sup>

Active within this turning back, Miller uncovers an ethical drive, which is integral to such practices of ‘attentive’ reading. This drive is one which Miller strongly identifies with the practice of deconstruction, since deconstruction is always a turning back; as a critical act it is turned towards the recession of the epistemological ‘blindnesses’ of the text and the exposure of its metaphysical limits. The unreadability of the text emerges in this turning towards limits, in the attempt of the text to read itself, which it is finally unable achieve, not because it lacks the will so to do, but because all representation necessarily fails to present that to which it refers. *Miller’s ethics of reading then, arises in the attempt and failure of a text to read itself, to break its existing discursive limitations.* What Miller would call a text’s attempt at self-reading then, shares some affinity with what Andrew



Quick has identified as a sublime aesthetic operative in performance work, re-figuring Quick's notion within a stronger epistemological and ethical framework.<sup>34</sup> If, as Quick asserts, a sublime aesthetic occurs when a text attempts to present what its presentation finds unpresentable, it is in Miller's terms attempting to read itself, attempting to locate its unthought thought, what it does not know. In this attempt at self-reading the text will always repeat its failure to enfigure its potential exterior because it is subject to the law of unreadability, the unavoidability of "epistemological error", the potential aberrancy of all "metaphorical naming".<sup>35</sup>

For Miller ethicality neither precedes nor follows these acts of self-reading but occurs in their very eventhood as a necessary moment. The genitive "of" within Miller's title, he explains, does not simply suggest an ethics following from reading, but one that is integral to it and occurs within it. An ethical moment arises at the concrete scene of interpretation and is an "individual and particular" event. The ethical experience is then one that arises in the present moment of reading, in that particular temporal framework which belongs to the promise, in this moment verification is absent and knowledge is suspended. In Miller's eyes this moment is not properly political or social, though it may lead to such acts. The ethical moment in reading contains an imperative which operates on the reader, prompting them towards action. Ethics then, is seen as "intimately intertwined" with political considerations though not fully determined by them. As Miller states,

There must be an influx of performative power from the linguistic transaction involved in the act of reading into the realms of knowledge, politics, and history.<sup>36</sup>

A text, in Miller's writing specifically literature, is thus perceived as a spur to agency. Yet despite this commitment to a notion of an ethical moment inspiring social action, in this work at least, there is little elaboration of how the ethical moment relates to political thought or transforms into political agency (or for that matter what kind of politics would arise from ethics).

Miller's assertion that moral law cannot simply be experienced but must always be presented to the subject and encountered through a (narrating) textual medium, has important implications not only for the literary and philosophical areas of enquiry which his work addresses but also for theatre and performance. This assertion guarantees the residence of ethical concerns within fictional works and simultaneously enshrines the impossibility of the attainment of moral law through such works. His contention that ethical decisions which subjects make are tied to the initiation of imaginative productions which cannot be verified, and that an ethical experience may be ascertained in moments of exposure to such fictions, has implications for any formal project whether in the realm of philosophy, literature or theatre, which seeks to address or enact an ethical encounter.

Such an encounter would then only be proper to the dynamics of the kind of promissory forms which Miller identifies. I will argue that Miller's location of such ethical encounters within particular practices of reading, in which a text turns towards its own discursive limitations and exclusions, and within this turning enacts once again its own unreadability, can be applied to performance practices which initiate corresponding acts of self-reading. These acts of self-reading will similarly be seen to involve a mode of fictional presentation that is performative and promissory, in the sense that they enact the activity that their



speech signifies, they are prescribed by the temporality of their utterance, and the statements that they make cannot be instantly verified or confirmed. They will also be seen to operate, as in Miller's notion of self-reading, an imperative upon the reader; the witnessing of these events is also the witnessing of an epistemological limit which occasions an injunction on its spectator to imagine its beyond.

### ***The Ethics of Performance***

Though Miller acknowledges that "to live is to read" his own readings stay well within the bounds of the literary-textual and as such there is a certain limitation in their application to live events. In particular, the restraints around Miller's terms and objects of address mean that his ethics of reading has little to say about the possibility of ethics within material, embodied, or social situations. Such possibilities have been most powerfully advanced by Emmanuel Levinas, for whom the ethical demand is not principally found in the context of the readership of texts.<sup>37</sup> Simon Critchley in *The Ethics of Deconstruction* has argued, following Levinas, that

ethics is first and foremost a respect for the concrete particularity of the other person in his or her singularity, a person who is not merely an example of the law, [. . .] but rather the condition of possibility for an experience of the law.<sup>38</sup>

It would, however, be an essential simplification to think that this Levinasian position necessarily disqualifies, negates or contradicts Miller's quest for an ethics of reading.

Both Miller's and Levinas's ethics are concerned with a relation to alterity, for Miller this relation emerges in the moment of reading, for Levinas in the moment of encounter with

another. I will argue that the personalised and inter-subjective situation to which Levinas and Critchley refer cannot be readily separated from the linguistic horizon in which it would take place. To disqualify Miller's ethics on the basis of the Levinasian privileging of the "concrete particularity" of the personal encounter would be to assert, in an essential fashion, the primacy and purity of reality over and against the textual. The "concrete" and "particular" other of which Critchley speaks, cannot be encountered or addressed outside of the bounds of linguistic mediation. Though its material manifestation will be very different, this encounter is, in effect, another form of reading.

Thus my own interpretation of the ethical relation, whilst recognising the significance of the embodied and material conditions of its possibility, seeks to employ a much wider notion of readership, beyond Miller's literary and philosophical texts, activated within material realities, but nonetheless sharing with Miller an understanding of the exclusion of alterity at epistemological limits. Critchley's assertion of the particular "singularity" of the ethical relation can thus be used to further Miller's definition of ethics by extending it beyond its specific context and by effectively enfleshing it. The emerging theoretical formulation could not adequately be termed 'the ethics of reading', but perhaps in this context at least, should more accurately be called 'the ethics of performance'. Obviously this conceptual move is significant for a discussion of performance and its spectatorship because a performance event is not simply the reading of a text, but the witnessing of an embodied act by particular others in real space and time. Brought together in this way Miller's ethics of reading and the Levinasian formulation of the meeting of alterity enable a reading of a performance's ethicality which encompasses both the physical and textual



aspects of the encounter, as synecdochal elements in an unfulfillable quest for an experience of moral law.

The Levinasian formulation of ethics centres on the principle of a putting into question of self-consciousness and its objects, or the terrain of “the knowing subject”.<sup>39</sup> Levinas sees the operations of this subject as tirelessly self-solidifying and its terrain characterised by an habituality. The knowing subject is constantly absorbing and possessing what is other to it. The otherness to which Levinas here refers is not the simple everyday otherness of objects in the world, but an infinitely receding epistemological alterity which escapes the cognitive grasp of the subject. The self is thus constantly embroiled in a process which fails to do justice to the very alterity of this otherness. The subject’s every cognitive act is a violent reduction of this alterity, a form of adequation. For Levinas ethics does not merely consist of a challenge to the subject’s knowledge, for as Critchley argues, the terrain of the knowing subject “includes not only the intentional acts of consciousness, but also the intentional objects which give meaning to those acts and which are constituted by consciousness”.<sup>40</sup> Thus Jill Robbins includes within her list of aspects of the “habitual economy” of the knowing subject, which must succumb to an ethical questioning, the “instances” of “vision”, “representation, understanding, recognition, or any form of the theoretical relation”.<sup>41</sup> The correspondence with Miller’s formulation thus becomes somewhat clearer: the ethical relation is a question applicable to the realm of representation as well as the realm of the subject’s knowledge. If for Levinas an ethical relation emerges in the putting into question of the terrain of the knowing subject, for

Miller a similar relation is instanced in the putting into question of that which the text is conscious of, an interrogation of the cognitive limits of the text.

Levinas's term for the realm of the knowing subject is 'the Same', a realm which is always called in to question by 'the Other', that which eludes the knowing-subject, that which is alterior and not reducible to self-consciousness. This alterity is a correlate of Miller's potential outside of representation, a putative exterior, an ignorance nestling in the text which it cannot explain and which "ruptures its coherence". Levinasian ethics is based upon the active resistance of the reduction of the Other to the Same; the opening of the continuous grasping enterprise of consciousness which seeks to condense otherness to itself. For Levinas an ethical relation would be achieved by an orientation of consciousness towards alterity within the experience of its presentation: a spontaneous opening to "the way in which the Other presents himself, *exceeding the idea of the other in me*". [my italics]<sup>42</sup> Again it is important to note here that in a similar vein to Miller's exterior of the text, Levinas's specific formulation situates the alterity of the Other, beyond the grasp of the subject / text. Thus the Other which exceeds the subject / text will always be other to an idea / representation of it within the subject / text. Just as Miller's understanding of the limits of textuality is based on failure and ineluctable exclusion, so the Levinasian understanding of the habitual economy of the subject is predicated on ineradicable suppression. As Robbins notes, from a Levinasian perspective, "even the apparent attempts to respect the other, by way of recognition or comprehension, end up doing violence to him or her, precisely because recognition and comprehension are adequating [...] forms".<sup>43</sup> In this respect, the necessary failure of any moral law to



inscribe and preserve the ethical relation for both Miller and Levinas is understandable, since any recognition or systematic representation of that relation will inevitably enact some form of injustice.

Given Levinas's definition of ethics as an absolute duty to an infinitely receding alterity, how then, might one even begin, to live, write, represent, or perform in an ethical manner? Moreover, how might one theorise an ethics of any sort which is not, in its own inevitably adequating form, a 'betrayal' of the ethical relation? As Critchley notes, Levinasian ethics announces itself as a 'first philosophy' because it sees its own articulations as resistive to the Western philosophical tradition which it posits is founded on ontological thought.<sup>44</sup> By this Levinas means that preceding his intervention philosophy sought to determine the meaning of Being and beings as objects of cognition. Levinas sees this modality of thought as part of the habitual economy of the self, in which phenomena submit to the assimilation of consciousness, an economy which Levinas seeks to resist since it "consists in suppressing or reducing all forms of otherness by transmuting their alterity into the Same". As a 'first philosophy' then Levinasian ethics attempts to resist this history of ontological writing, by theorising a modality of expression which does not fix its objects, which resists the possession and assimilation of alterities by the knowing subject. In fact, in the course of his critical rapprochement between Derrida and Levinas, Critchley argues that Levinas's *Otherwise Than Being* actually enacts such a form of writing which he strongly aligns with deconstructive thought. Here Miller's and Critchley's perspectives are coincident as they propose an ethicality within a form of critical writing which is turned towards its own epistemological exclusions.

Levinas's concern to find a form of language that will embody the ethical goal of staying open to the possibilities of the Other is approached through his formulation of "the Saying" and "the Said". This formulation is particularly productive in relation to the aesthetics of contemporary performance, and enables an analysis of the ethical dynamics of this work. The Said for Levinas is an ontological order of expression, in which the nature of things in the world is discovered and understood. In effect the Said is a form of meaning resolution, the closure of meaning into statement. In contrast the Saying ruptures the ontological order of expression and perturbs the attainment and closure of understanding. The Saying is the act of articulation in which meaning is opened. Here it is interesting to note that Levinas's terms correspond with Miller's temporalisation of the ethical which in both cases is located within the present moment of reading or encounter. This notion of the Saying is coextensive with Miller's notion of a promissory form of fiction. However, the Saying and the Said, is most readily related to Miller's linguistic distinction, following J. L. Austin, between the performative and the constative, significantly equating the performative articulation as the form through which an ethical relation can emerge, as Critchley explains:

The Saying is my exposure - corporeal, sensible - to the Other, my inability to refuse the Other's approach. It is the performative stating, proposing, or expressive position of myself facing the Other. It is a verbal or non-verbal ethical performance, whose essence cannot be caught in constative propositions. In contrast the Said is a statement, assertion or proposition, concerning which the truth or falsity can be ascertained. [...] The Saying is the sheer radicality of human speaking, of the event of being in relation with an Other; it is the non-thematizable ethical residue of language that escapes comprehension, [...] and is the very enactment of the



ethical movement from the Same to the Other.<sup>45</sup>

Since, the reduction of the Other to the Same, the incorporation of the Saying into the Said, is inevitable, as it is the very process of consciousness and its objects, Levinasian ethics, in its quest for exposure to the Other, is thus concerned with orders of encounter and expression which unsay the Said, which rupture the Said through the interruption of the Saying.

In *Unmarked*, her complex meditation on the cultural significance of performance, Peggy Phelan identifies a radical potential in specific forms of cultural performance across a number of different media. She remarks in particular that, “performance art is vulnerable to charges of valuelessness and emptiness. Performance indicates the possibility of revaluing that emptiness; this potential revaluation gives performance art its distinctive oppositional edge”.<sup>46</sup> Here I would add to Phelan’s remarks that the cultural significance of performance is in part due to the ethical relation and experience that it is capable of staging. For Phelan the radical charge of performance is explained through the characteristics that it shares with the performative speech act, or what Levinas might term the Saying. Since the performative speech act and performance take place within the present moment and articulate meanings which are non-descriptive, unverifiable and enacted, for Phelan they resist the economy of reproduction. Like Levinas, Phelan is wary of this economy, which is, of course, the economy of the Same, an economy which is built on the suppression and exclusion of alterity. For Phelan this economy is complicit with patriarchal psychic structures and ideologies which she seeks to unwind, consequently her work, which both takes performance as its object and performativity as its own linguistic

paradigm, is an attempt to define a radical politics that is not based on the orders of the representational and the visible. This project, like that of Levinas, can be seen as an attempt to open critical and philosophical writing in a non-ontological ethical mode; to perturb the Said through the interruption of the Saying. Crucially, as Phelan asserts in relation to specific performance works, since, like the performative speech act, performance does not conform to the orders of reproduction, it can be attributed a distinct ontology:

Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being [...] becomes itself through disappearance.<sup>47</sup>

It is precisely this inclination of the performative speech act and of the performance work I discuss here, away from reproduction and the economies of the Same, and towards disappearance and thus towards alterity, which can be seen to encompass an ethical dynamic.

### ***Staging Reading***

Readers are warned that the sketch maps and boundaries here are provisional, approximate, unreliable and wrong. Nonetheless I have furnished them, for as my text is no more than a pack of lies they can do no harm ...

Queen of Nothing *we call on you* to help us ... [my italics]<sup>48</sup>



In her analysis of the implications of Derridean deconstruction for contemporary theatre and performance Elinor Fuchs suggests that, “Writing, which has traditionally retired behind the apparent presence of performance, is openly declaring itself the environment in which dramatic structure is situated”, and that this ‘historically unique’ declaration presents writing itself as the “subject, activity and artifact” of much contemporary work.<sup>49</sup> Setting aside the more sweeping and homogenizing claims around theatre history and “tradition” which accompany this statement, Fuchs’s identification of the significance of writing within the aesthetics of performance is important here. The self-reflexive foregrounding of textuality entailed within this performed acknowledgement of the linguistic limits of the stage, can be identified as operative at many different levels within contemporary performance works; from the appearance of activities of writing and scenic inscription which Fuchs notes, to the deprivileging of text through its incorporation as texture or as only one element amongst many in an integrated aesthetic, to disruptions of textual syntax and grammar, a density of intertextual reference, the presence of multiple languages on stage, and the use of mediated vocals and textual soundtracks, all of which Fuchs does not give a sustained attention. Fuchs’s interest in this article is really the ‘attack’ in contemporary theatre on the notion of theatrical presence rather than the ‘new’ textual dynamics she announces, and though abbreviated in relation to the emerging aesthetic she invokes, her remarks are of significance here since they acknowledge the presence of an evident linguistic and discursive inscription within performance aesthetics. This presence, I will contend, is accompanied by an equally important presence of action-as-reading within performance work.

Of course, it is important to note that not all self-reflexive works enact the degree or nature of discursive criticism which can be paralleled with the modalities and insights of deconstruction. As the debates around the questions of the politics of parody, pastiche, irony and kitsch suggest, self-consciousness within cultural forms does not in and of itself guarantee critique, let alone deconstruction.<sup>50</sup> However what I intend to show through a sustained and close analysis of Forced Entertainment's performance piece *Club of No Regrets*, is the ethical potential of a particular form of self-reading within performance (locatable within specific aesthetic practices) that pushes at its own epistemological limits. In this work there is, as Fuchs might term it, an openly announced presence of writing which both suggests that the stage space is 'always already written' and that the staged articulations are not those of learnt textual material whose textuality is secreted through a pretence of direct speech. However this presence of writing is also accompanied in *Club of No Regrets* by an evident display of action-as-reading. This action-as-reading is one means through which the performance reads itself. The self-reading which the performance operates can be seen both at the level of individual instances within the work, and I will contend, at a more significant level of structure. This structural self-reading is one which contains an imperative for both the actor and the spectator; a self-reading which calls into question both the epistemological limits of the text and the knowledge of the spectating subject.

In *Club of No Regrets* Terry O'Connor, assuming the strangely anonymous character of "Helen X", attempts to read several books that she has discovered at the back of a stage



set. She is obscured by the scenery. Her voice is faltering, stumbling over the words. She announces re-writings of occasional phrases and sporadically discards books until she comes upon a collection of papers. She ascends to a position above the setting of a room with blackboard walls. A male and female performer sit inside this interior room which is contained within a larger room, inhabited by another male-female couple and bounded by a cityscape crudely chalked on a large blackboard backdrop. The performers in the inner room are perfunctorily bound and gagged with parcel tape by those in the outer room. O'Connor begins shouting out scenes and the hostages try to play the parts handed to them on scraps of paper, by reading and subsequently by acting out. The performers in the outer room attempt to facilitate this reading and acting out, by various interventions, often involving furnishing the performers and the inner room itself with incongruous properties. O'Connor calls the fragmentary scenes, willing them to make a play. The staging which the performers enact is continually interrupted and perceived by them as incorrect; each attempt to stage a scene or a sequence of scenes ends in collapse, and yet each time, the performers re-mount their efforts in an attempt to reach a 'correct' rendition.

Within this piece, as with all of Forced Entertainment's work, there is a deliberate questioning of the status of the event which we witness; the performance's originary presence in the present time of enactment is marked by secondarity. The performance does not secrete its rehearsed and pre-scripted nature but makes this nature evident: as such the performance is marked as a re-presentation. This inscription arises in this piece through a particular temporal positioning of the place of writing in relation to the event;

writing is seen to both precede and encompass the work. This lack of secreted writing shifts the status of speech within the work, enabling a presentation of speech as recitation, in other words as *the reading* of memory. In addition, within *Club of No Regrets*, many textual fragments or ‘scenes’, are explicitly *read out*; they appear on sheets which are handed to the performers. As the work progresses, some performers discard these sheets, however their new ‘unprompted’ recitations are marked by the now established knowledge of such sayings as dependent upon reading. These fragments themselves, as stolen artefacts from different media, enhance the sense of the piece as one which takes place within a textual *mise-en-abyme*. Further the acts which the performers stage are evidently displayed as re-interpretations of texts, to this extent they appear as *re-readings within and of the live event* (this re-reading includes transient readings of the moment, of the other performers, and of the properties employed). In the repeated stagings of these scenes, the re-reading of the reading out is both a re-speaking and a re-thinking of its possibilities through its performance. The structural configuration of this work is then the staging of a reading, in the sense that five performers make an attempt to read out a series of mysteriously unconnected scenes, but also in the sense that they are principally involved in a cyclical re-reading, in its broadest sense, of this material through performance. Each scene once read out fails to conjure what it attempts to stage. All the scenes are later re-read out, re-staged, re-read again, in a tireless aspirant cycle. What this structure embodies is a kind of irrepressible re-cycling of language, through action-as-reading, in an attempt to conjure what remains exterior to the limitations of the texts.



The performance space itself is bounded by writing (a recurrent motif in the company's work) and though the backdrop of scrawled text and neon signs of a previous piece, *Marina and Lee*, is missing, the chalked cityscape is an evident inscription of the horizon, 'read' by the sweep of a performer's light and physically overwritten in chalk with unreadable text at moments in the piece. The inner room is itself chalked with writing which marks the physical boundaries of the scene as textual limits. The words "forensic reconstruction" are prominent on one wall, again suggesting that the event is no more than a copy, a re-production. The material and linguistic economies of the piece are restricted; there are only so many props, only so many phrases, only so many scenes. Yet, in the staged re-readings each unit within this economy is re-presented in a unique context, each unit is asked to re-signify differently, to push at the limits of its signifying possibility. The bag, the pot of flowers, the telephone, perpetually return. With its use of this restricted circulation of signs (objects and texts) the work signals the limitations of language and material reality in relation to the project of imagining some other beyond their boundary. In relation to the creative powers of the acting subjects, just as the work embodies the enlarging moment in the necessary attempt to imagine, it marks the factors and operations of imagination's curtailment by all that is already present and given without choice in the surrounding matrix of the subject; the linguistic and material objects with which the performers work.

*The performers are, of course, staging an 'as if', but they do not know how to act.* The fictive worlds which the piece invokes are an attempt to form a representation of reality, but also an attempt to stage a fiction which would resolve the failure inhering within the

subjects and their performances. This failure can then be read as an inability to construct an operative social 'scene', in which the agents are able to "live", as the text of *Emanuelle Enchanted* might put it, able to act out intention without error, able to interact without misunderstanding and misreading, able to encounter the otherness of each other. The piece makes a specific equation between acting in its theatrical sense and acting in its social sense. The longed-for operative social scene would be a scene of propriety and moral law. The 'as if' as the generative constituent of the ethical decision enables the performer to seek the decisive rendition that would conjure the general law on acting; "when did you first discover that the world was magic?" O'Connor asks. All of the performers perform the text they have been given *as if* it might attain this law. They attempt to find a moment in which the text might disappear, might nail reality, might still its perturbation in a sudden epiphany of the true moment, a representation without the remainder of opacity: a timeless rendering of law in the real. The law which this work is constantly seeking through the stagings of its faltering 'as ifs', is precisely that moral law which is figured as unknowable and unfaceable by Miller; this then is a moral law which would resolve the question of how to act, how to live when you have done something and seen something.

Since that which the performers wish to stage is never made manifest, the category of fiction which they present can be described as that form of promissory fiction which Miller identifies as a condition of an ethical reading. The object of the performer's quest remains unattained. The structure of this work encompasses a vast series of individual, material, linguistic, narrative and scenic failures; moments where the representational frameworks



which the performers have staged collapse into the eventhood of the performance itself. The arduous attempts which the performers make to stage the fictional fragments are transformative acts: the texts belong to a constative order (they *describe* potential scenes) and are then subject to a performative articulation. The fictions which are staged in these speech acts are evidently incorrect, their resonance is not assured or verifiable. The meanings of these fictional fragments are opened in this speaking, and their closure is suspended through their evident incoherence. As such these performative transformations of the representational matter of the work correspond with the Levinasian understanding of an ethicality arising in the putting into question of the “habitual economy” of the subject, its acts of consciousness and their objects. The performers repeatedly attempt to stage what is other to these objects of consciousness; that which the fictional scene fails to deliver. This then is a cyclical rendition of the Said ruptured by the Saying, only to be consumed again by the Said. In the moments of fictional destruction O’Connor is always grasping for her next object of consciousness, her next, and this time she hopes, infallible and final scene. There is a sense for the spectator in these moments of having been plunged into the present time, the unreproducible now. Many of these moments are marked with a sense of waiting, a kind of mute witnessing of the event itself, facing an imminent and imaginary correct acting out. Though utterly committed to getting it right they are condemned to get it wrong. Their readings, like the texts (which have themselves already been announced as “a pack of lies”), are subject to Miller’s law of unreadability, they succumb to epistemological error. As O’Connor remarks at the frayed ending of a particularly agitated rendition, “I’m lost. I’ve completely lost the thread of it”.

As it is evidenced through this vast edifice of representational failures, the model of action which the work employs is one in which intention is never transparently linked to effect. In this respect the overall staging of a series of seemingly unconnected scenes which fail to meld into a coherent fictional world reflects the position that authorial intention, both in terms of a notional off-stage director and the evident on-stage creation of the work by the performers, is no guarantee of representational effects. This understanding is manifested not only at the level of structure within the work, but in multiple momentary enactments. Each individual assertion of the performers in the outer room in relation to the inner scene, is shown to initiate incongruous resonances which exceed the evident intentions of the performers. This model of action is always errant in relation to the subject's intentions is made acutely manifest through the use of O'Connor as an individuated figure, the structural manipulation of her as a key performer with which the spectator identifies (she initiates and frames the piece), and of course her seemingly endless and ever failing attempts to interpret and master the work.

O'Connor, raised above the inner scene, taking a position in which she has a privileged perspective on the work, is used as a kind of failing director figure; her attempts to control and organise the material are always marked as inadequate. She is caught in a non-productive confusion in relation to the staging of the work, either haplessly directing some future enactment within inert moments, or sadly behind in her understanding of events as they are happening, as she attempts to make corrective adjustments ("more colour", "more cops") that are as pathetic as the scenes to which they refer. In this respect she is



temporally inscribed in a kind of impure present tense, not adequately within the now of the enactment, nor capable of ordering past events into a future realisation. Both O'Connor's organisational failure and the presence of shattered fictions, containing extracted and incomplete narratives which never cohere into a hermetic fictive world, mark the attempt to stage a singular organising narrative within this morally driven 'as if', as one that is impossible. Here the work figures narrative as incapable of rendering a replete and coherent fiction, an 'as if' which would deliver an experience of moral law, an example of how to act. In this respect the performance shares that "incredulity" towards meta-narrative of which Lyotard has spoken, in particular the meta-narrative which would answer the moral quest of the performance, by a correct and proper narration.

What is the scene that is never staged? A seemingly unstageable scene, a scene without properties, a scene without a text, a scene without binding to material determinants. Most significantly the scene which cannot be staged is the scene without binding to the Other. Outside of the witness role of O'Connor much of the action is figured in shifting but always paired relationships. The pairs enter the stage together, and the scenes always proceed through some form of binary counterpointing. This binding to another subject is marked in the seemingly inexplicable acts of literal binding which take place in this work. The performers are frequently and vigorously bound into a scene with another. Metaphorically then, this binding, is not simply 'a prisonhouse of language', but an intersubjective cord, where one is always locked in relation to others, with whom an attempt at encounter, indeed at mutual knowledge, must be made; an arbitrarily given script must be enacted, a "procedure scene", though the understanding of these others that

the performers exhibit is poor, and the facilities and available techniques with which to accept them are dismal.

The encounter between two individuals which these scenes maintain as their object, is constantly seen as perturbed by intermediaries or by interruptions, by the interventions of other individuals or by the textual and material properties which are supposed to be facilitating the encounter. As O'Connor notes at one point in the piece "All the persons herein depicted are fictitious", the performers are unable to break through the textual boundaries of the work, and yet they are, as Miller notes in relation to the text, and as Critchley notes in relation to the other person, "the condition of possibility for an experience of the law". In its staging of interruptions the work explicitly points to a force inherent within communication itself which is responsible for this ineradicable mediation of the union of subjects. One repeated scene is entitled the "Just as they're about to kiss the telephone rings scene". Through its constant repetition this scene plays a powerful symbolic role, suggesting that, as Levinas might argue, there is always some intermediary structure preventing the encounter with alterity, in this case the alterity of the other person. In *Club of No Regrets* this intermediary structure is openly identified as the "intentional acts of consciousness" and its "intentional objects"; it is always attributal to some force within communication and expression. The frequently repeated "Look how I'm crying" scene symbolically enshrines this impossible quest for understanding of the Other: "Queen of Nothing, we call on you to help us". The emotional trajectory of each articulation is a plea to another subject for engagement with the conditions in which the speaking subject finds themselves. Here all that is interior to the speaking subject is seen



as a necessary limit which her interlocutor(s) must approach. Again it seems that it is consciousness itself which is at fault within intersubjective relations; “can’t you *see* how I’m crying”, the performer incants, since it is sight itself which is preventing their union, “cease to see”, she instructs.

Despite the collage nature of the text, the piece is not without its organising metaphors, which circulate around and inform the operations and meanings of the failed stagings, or what Etchell’s often terms the “attempt structures”.<sup>51</sup> In this piece references to police procedures, scenarios from cop movies and acts of criminality and violence are endemic. This level of referential saturation raises the spectre of law within the piece as a significant framework in its readership. However due to the multiple instances and incohesion of the many fictional fragments which contribute to this referentiality, the referent remains oblique and open, irreducible to a mundane interpretation of a thematic of criminality, yet consistently invoking the force of a notion of propriety in action. The textual fragments which create this resonance are employed in cyclical incantations which mark them as elements in a symbolic ambition, as if through the various attempted stagings of this work, an experience of law may be attained. The unattainable final rendition which the performance seeks, in this context, is inflected as a scene of legality, a representation of lawfulness. In this respect the piece is concerned to loosely evoke the goal of ‘propriety’ and ‘responsibility’ without seeing it as a representational possibility. The sum inference of this metaphorical inflection is that violence is irredeemably resident within the context in which the performers act, that the performers or the characters which they present are in some way always already ‘criminal’, and that what they seek through their serial

stagings is some form of release from this 'primordial corruption'. In the terms invoked in *Emanuelle Enchanted* the performers have inevitably done something and seen something. This sense of 'originary criminality' shadows the performing subject and the possibility of proper action which this work so tirelessly seeks.

### ***Unbinding Coda***

The understanding of social relations that this piece presents then, is one in which there is an inherent violence in the ontology and epistemological operations of the subject. "Have you killed anyone?" O'Connor earnestly asks one performer. "I don't know" the performer flatly replies. The possibility of violence to the other is not dismissed, it is seen as an inevitable consequence of existence. As Bauman notes, the distance between actions and their effects means that they are not verifiable by their originating subjects. "I don't know", the performer replies, because he cannot know, in a culture in which the realm of consequentiality is vastly expanded, and in a performance which reflects this expansion through its aesthetics. This resident violence is not attributed with a clearly identified causal impetus within the fictional scenarios of the work. There is not for instance, one narrative act which initiates change or retribution for its agents, but rather, this violence is seen as a property of existence, emanating in particular from the stubbornness and immutability of the objects with which the performers work: the material properties and language, the fragmentary products of knowledge and culture. Presented in this way, this violence is then directly attributable to the habitual economies of the self, to those operations and products of consciousness, which Levinas identifies as suppressive and



exclusionary in relation to alterity. The presence of this violence is initially readable as one trace amongst other substantial metaphors. It arises for instance, in multiple momentary acts, when a performer extends a hand to another in an open gesture, only for that hand to have a gun surreptitiously inserted in it, comically turning the moment of connection into one of assault, or in the enforced binding of the performers to the scenery at the end of a heightened sequence of attempts, where the failure of the staging is transformed into a moment of quiet frustrated recrimination between the performers, edging towards a personalised sadism. However, this understanding is one which is only implicitly traced within the first section of this work, and emerges explicitly and in a more complex form in a long coda which follows the exhaustion of the attempts to stage the inner scene.

At the point at which the inner scene seems utterly exhausted of all possibility, the walls of the room are split apart and dispersed to the edges of the outer room. The inner scene's material limits, the properties, set and text all recede, until the performers are left framed only by the chalked city. The room beyond the specificity of the relationship with the particular other has been dismantled and we are presented with an outside, a wider realm, the terrain of others. This scene appears utterly unstageable. The performers seem more genuinely lost than they have been throughout this chronically faltering work. The representational machinery of the performance itself seems to halt, the soundtrack is abruptly cut and in a typically fragile moment O'Connor announces "can we have the music please?" The previous scenes and their associated properties have been discarded, as if they have somehow lost their utility, or exhausted their significance, in the way in which ideas once known are dead to thought. An exquisite and brutally simplistic

performance coda follows. The couples backed only by the naive writing of the cityscape, re-bind each other to chairs in two alternate scenes. *These stagings are a structural example of that critical and literary turn which Miller identifies as a self-reading.* In this turning back, there is a re-reading of the previous long scene which is itself now re-read by the spectators and the performers through this new set of actions. This coda is in fact barely describable as a scene (it really contains only one repeated and mutating action), resembling more an exploded filmic fragment, an extended gesture. Again the filmic referent here (*Reservoir Dogs* and other torture / kidnap scenarios) is one which is imbued with resonances of law. Retaining the binary configuration, the performers attempt to escape their binding in an ambivalent, violent, pathetic, humorous and saddening struggle. Flailing about the stage, bound to a stubborn materiality that slowly yields, they attempt a further escape. Language is again presented as the boundary which the subject seeks to 'escape', as here O'Connor chalks a circle around herself and repeatedly gestures with a knife, as if cutting through the imaginary thicket which surrounds her. The trees which had gradually encroached the stage space have receded and the metaphor of the wood is now aligned with a scriptural limit. The woods from which the performers / characters have been seeking escape, are still invoked within O'Connor's articulations, yet they are physically replaced by chalk perimeters. The boundaries which encircle the subject are thus further emphasised as limits of writing and of representation. Counterpointing the compelling struggles of the bound performers and O'Connor, the unbound couple spectate, drink beer and perform strangely uninhibited dancing. They swap roles and the struggle is repeated.



Formally, this coda appears to embody both a reduction of the previous long scene and a tangential enactment. Its simplification of action is both familiar and unprecedented, and in its very minimalism, its clearing away and emptying out, it stages a clarification, like Miller's footnote, a turning back which inspires a re-reading of the main body of the work. As with Miller's understanding of the footnote, the moment of clarification, promised in the simplicity of this staging, is also a moment of 'blindness' where an epistemological limit is met, the resonances which this act invokes can be barely contained by the vision and discourses of the piece. To read this dense and elusive scene very literally, its particular staging, where one dances another is tortured, suggests that the subject's freedom is based on an other's incarceration, the subject's pleasure on an other's pain. In this respect the coda makes explicit what has previously been implicit, staging an ethical reading of its own discursive structures, it clarifies and dramatically stages its vision of subjectivity as one which is inevitably tainted by the cruelty of the reductions and exclusions of consciousness. In turning in this way to produce this understanding, *the work enacts an ethical self-reading*.

Of course, at the epistemological limits of the text, some other alterity remains unencountered, since as Miller notes the text is subject to the law of unreadability, the error of all naming. The two scenes into which the coda is split duplicate each other to the extent that they both contain acts of binding and escape. However, these scenes are quite distinct, they are given soundtracks which evoke polar resonances; the first is ecstatic, wild, unrestrained, the second suffused with loss and lamentation yet somehow resolved.

In the first scene the performers who have finished binding the other two, move to the back of the stage space and dance in a manner which is suggestive of exhilarated release tempered only by exhaustion. In the second scene these same performers are rebound, but their counterparts do not dance, instead they stand at the back of the stage space witnessing and quietly drinking. Brought to this moment of clarification and of turning back, it is here, in these densely suggestive and complex events, that *for me* the performance unties itself, sets in motion a thought which I had not yet encountered. It seems to me now that this enactment invokes interpersonal dynamics which the piece itself cannot account for. In this first scene of the coda, the ob-scene outer scene finds what the work had previously kept beyond the walls of its writing: not just unmotivated casual violence, or inexplicable malign intent, but a kind of safety or operational necessity in the habitual economy of violence to the Other. Since, in the first scene of the coda, the work entwines together the experiences of pain and pleasure within intersubjective relations, it loosely invokes the possibility of pleasure in these modalities of violence and security, built upon a sadistic drive. In the second scene of the coda this invocation is swept away by the overwhelming sadness of the soundtrack, its sense of loss and nostalgia, which resurrects a care for the Other, erasing the dispassion for the Other which was previously invoked. Yet this dispassion and disregard cannot be so easily swept away. In this overwhelming, there is also an overcoming, an adjustment and revision, of the potentiality and implications of sadism which the piece so fleetingly invoked. This erasure I contend, says more than it thinks it says about the pleasure in the neglect of the Other, perhaps also revealing in its 'indiscretion' a particular ideology of gender. The ways in which the piece flattens the dynamics of gender difference within the invocation of this sadistic urge, fails



to present or explore the possibility that this desire may be specifically gendered; that it may be part of a patriarchal economy of intersubjective exchange and encounter.

The acts of self-reading which this piece stages cannot only be located as part of individual works, but can also be seen as this company's paradigm of aesthetic development. Forced Entertainment, in their quest to expand the aesthetic and intellectual possibilities of their work often focus on "dense moments", moments of representational difficulty, as starting points for new works. In this way the creative process with which they are engaged is one of revision and re-working; a process which is evidenced in the presence of re-cycled material (textual, physical, scenic) placed in new contexts. In the final chapter of this thesis I will return to a later work, *Speak Bitterness*, which develops their use of self-reading within the aesthetic, the notion of an 'originary criminality', and the gendering of the acting subject. This work will be seen to involve distinct understandings of subjectivity, and as such will be used to develop a sustained analysis of identity as it is constituted and dispersed through performance.

### ***The Persistence of Value at the Limits of Interpretation***

Seen in the context of the problematisation of Modernist and Rationalist discourses and the diminished grip of metanarratives, the destabilisation of the authority of moral law is perhaps symptomatic of a wider and profoundly debilitating contemporary condition: a now entrenched incredulity towards any cultural / theoretical assertion of value, which reflects the fundamental and systematic collapse of the notion of value itself within cultural

and theoretical expression. As I have argued previously, in cultural theory, universal, transhistorical, objectivist, absolute and essential moral law is perceived as redundant in relation to the complexity of contemporary conditions.<sup>52</sup> Implausible in its application, in each of its aspects it is exposed as a discursive construction, following particular narrative trajectories, and conceived and conceiving a particular model of the human subject. As such, moral law is seen to embody and impose problematic values; values whose origin, pertinence and application is questionable. Across many different cultural forms and critical disciplines notions of value such as those embedded in moral law have been systematically critiqued. However in recent times, across different critical disciplines, there has been a growing recognition of the theoretical impasse and absence of address that this critique of value leaves in its wake.<sup>53</sup> The critique, it is argued, effectively disables possibilities of social action since it does not (or hesitates to) offer operative models of engagement with social realities which require, at the very minimum, the adoption of evaluative modalities of thought and action. As Kate Soper notes, the emergent tendency of a “realist commitment” within critical theories has led to the reassertion and re-examination of terms which the critique of value had previously paralysed, “in aesthetics [...] ‘judgement’, ‘artistic worth’, ‘intrinsic merit’ [...] in epistemology [...] ‘truth’, ‘verification’, ‘objectivity’”.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, the collapse of the philosophy and theorisation of moral law has left in its wake an urgent need for a persuasive re-visioning of the ethics of personal and social relations and a demand for a critically and pragmatically operative notion of responsibility that can accommodate the changed nature of human interaction and social and cultural organisation, yet does not fall into the universalist and essentialist tendencies of older moralities. Emerging from the



critiques of value which have troubled notions of moral law I have outlined aspects of a theory of ethics which departs from some of the more problematic assumptions of older theorisations. In locating the operation of an ethicality within the aesthetics of performance, this work necessarily contains a certain cultural and philosophical value and maintains an impact in relation to the question of social agency.

Steven Connor, in his writings on the necessity of value, one of the most sustained and philosophically complex examples of analysis on the failure to resuscitate operative notions of value within cultural theory, argues that whilst the various assaults on the autonomy and integrity of value mean that we can no longer think of its existence in an objective sense, outside of the realms of its maintenance as value by discourse, this does not mean that value itself has disappeared.<sup>55</sup> Every cultural and critical act is ascribed and ascribes value, in fact takes place always already within a process of evaluation. However, after the advent of deconstructionist and poststructuralist writings the question of value in cultural theory has receded from an explicit critical focus, being supplanted by a somewhat purified emphasis on matters of language, meaning and epistemology. Connor thus argues that value has entered into and sheltered within the realms of the 'critical unconscious' where it has resisted a thorough and sustained interrogation.<sup>56</sup> Paradoxically, it would seem that this neglect has taken place against a context in which the ethical dimensions of critical thought have received much attention; an attention which is manifested in the texts I have cited.

Connor asserts that this qualitative discrepancy between the theorisation of value and of ethics is due in part to the absence of reconstructed theorisations of value after the fall of the old axiologies. For example notions of the value of aesthetic and cultural objects have been problematised through the exposure of the dependency of those valuations on grand narratives and cultural discourses which are implicated within oppressive relations of power. However, subsequently, no tenable model of aesthetic or cultural value has emerged, which is not in some way similarly implicated. Connor sees this kind of circuitous logic (which he finds operative in various examples of Marxist and feminist political theory) as a consequence of deconstruction's emphasis on negative interpretation which "leads to a suspicion of value and evaluation in general, as though the operations associated with the transaction of value were always destined to lead to (unjust) hierarchy and (violent) exclusion".<sup>57</sup> Here Connor seems to urge a certain pragmatism which may curb the excesses of an unfettered negative interpretation, by suggesting the urgent need for careful discrimination within critical thought on the question of which evaluations are genuinely unjust and genuinely violent. As such this statement is itself a call for values within evaluation.

Connor's point here echoes those of other theorists such as Donna Haraway and David Harvey in calling for a re-assertion of perspectives of value in critical theory. Haraway, for instance, in relation to the question of the political significance of cultural differences, argues that,

In the consciousness of our failures, we risk lapsing into boundless difference and giving up on the confusing task of making partial, real connection. Some differences are playful, some are poles of



world historical systems of domination. Epistemology is about knowing the difference.<sup>58</sup>

This expression, as Harvey notes, is an insistence similar to that of Connor, on the need for comparative valuations around alterity and difference. In particular Harvey is concerned about an absolute form of cultural relativism involving an unquestioning and indiscriminating valorisation of alterity, which leads to a paralysis of thought and action in relation to questions of social justice. Just as Haraway calls for an evaluative assertion on cultural difference, Harvey urges critical theory to adopt an “‘epistemology that can tell the difference’ between significant and insignificant differences or ‘othernesses’”.<sup>59</sup> As Harvey acknowledges, this epistemology necessarily requires a certain situatedness for the writing and acting subject, a recognition within this subject’s activities, of the positions and affinities of and through which it speaks, and the mobility and constructedness of this positionality.

This situatedness or positionality is of course never absent from writing, though the writing subject may seek to hide or only partially acknowledge it. Similarly, the strategy of negative interpretation which Connor critiques, cannot itself be seen to escape the insinuation of value within its own articulations, though it may think that it is “extricating itself from error, delusion and ideology”, since “every negative evaluation, even of the practice of evaluation itself, must always constitute a kind of evaluation on its own terms, even if it implies or states no positive alternative value”.<sup>60</sup> Since all texts contain their own discursive limitations, negative interpretation, the practice of deconstruction, or indeed the artwork turned towards the questioning of its own epistemological limits,

cannot escape the inevitable assertion of value. These forms of self-questioning do not initiate an interrogation that is endlessly active, involving some kind of infinite recession of meaning; every text has its own closures of meaning, its own borders of understanding. It is at such borders where evaluative marks are made, as Arkady Plotnitsky notes in relation to the resting point of meaning and understanding,

Any given chain in the network of the traces that constitute and produce a text, meaning or interpretive inference [...] is always abandoned somewhere, once we switch to a new chain. Evaluation as a structure is perhaps best seen in relation to this abandonment: that is the limits of our interpretations are evaluative, or rather evaluation inscribes itself in relation to such limits.<sup>61</sup>

As such no text is without value, without its own concealed or exclaimed statement, its own negations and affirmations, and as Plotnitsky asserts it is possible to identify these values at the epistemological limits which mark every text.

Whilst Connor's analysis is turned generally towards critical theory and in particular to axiology and political and ethical philosophies, his commentary has significant implications for the aesthetic and for artworks. For, as I have argued, it is not only theory which is engaged in the examination of its own values and evaluative statements, but artworks as well. Connor's presentation of the persistence of value haunts my own theorisation of the ethical imperative present within certain performance aesthetics. Could my own emphasis on the destabilising and disassembling operations of performance be said to succumb to precisely that paralysis around value which Connor identifies as predominant within contemporary cultural theory? Is this simply a matter of my projection, or could the performance work I have addressed here be said to embody a similar negation of the



question of value? The significance of this haunting is that whilst forms of performance, like some forms of critical writing, can be seen to radically put into question the stability of their own representational structures, the certainty of their own discursive limits and associated truth-claims - a putting into question which can be seen as containing an ethical imperative - such forms are nonetheless not cleansed of evaluative judgements. In other words, the various forms of opening of value which these performance works enact, cannot in themselves be seen as neutral or valueless, just as my own writing itself contains many value positions, both acknowledged and implicit, known and unknown to me. This emergence of value at the “limits of our interpretation” as Plotnitsky puts it, at the epistemological limits of texts, can be seen in operation both within performance works and within their discursive reception.

### ***The Opaque Other and Significant Alterities***

I have argued that it is possible to see an ethical project in the performance work I have discussed, and that here performance conditions an ethical experience through its putting into question of its own epistemological limits. This putting into question has been linked to particular aesthetic strategies, in which the exposure of representational structures and a performative Saying play important roles. Through their rupturing of ontological and epistemological security I have argued that this work initiates a relation with the unthought thought, with alterity, for its spectator. However, whilst this argument is useful in its location of ethics as dependent upon the questioning of epistemological certainty and an opening of a relation to ‘the Other’, when left encapsulated in such a monumental and

generalised term, the value of this actual relation to the Other remains somewhat uncharted. As Critchley and Levinas argue, the ethical relation is constituted through an irreducible “particularity”. To some extent my own discourse operates an avoidance of this particularity, when through its concentration on the structures of interpretation and epistemology, it puts forward an all too mechanistic and generalised understanding of representation, which inevitably homogenizes the many different operations of self-questioning in performance and the particular others which these different operations may address. Ironically then, the valorisation of alterity inherent in this approach remains somewhat ostensible.

In the following chapter, as a sustained response to this problem, I will draw together an analysis of diverse uses of performance where, I will argue, specific performative disruptions of epistemological limits are manipulated in order to open a particular relation with that most individual and most universal of alterities, the alterity of death. This shift in address, moves my discussion of the powers of performance, into a much broader area of cultural meaning and significance and I hope, disperses some of the opacity with which the notion of alterity has been shrouded. The resonance of this subject is not only socially and culturally profound, but personally and psychically charged, and as such, it is also in part, an attempt to distinguish and address what Harvey might term a “significant” alterity. As will shortly become evident, this address is indeed one which necessitates *a certain situation of the author* within the work. The traces of this necessity - a much stronger presence of a subjective voice, a use of autobiographical material - are traces which inevitably position the writing, and expose its implication in certain value structures.



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<sup>1</sup> An early version of this chapter was given as a paper at New York University Department of Performance Studies in May 1994, entitled ‘Aesthetic Space, Consciousness and the Ethical Self’.

I am grateful to Peggy Phelan, Simon Jones, Jackie Stacey and especially to Andrew Quick for their helpful responses to this earlier work.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Etchells, *Emanuelle Enchanted*, unpublished, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> This decline is explored most persuasively in Zygmunt Bauman’s *Postmodern Ethics*, Blackwell, 1993 and Richard Shusterman’s *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, Blackwell, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester University Press, 1984.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, Hal Foster, David Harvey, Linda Hutcheon, Frederic Jameson, and Martin Jay.

<sup>6</sup> Bauman: 9.

<sup>7</sup> Nick Kaye, ‘Theatricality and the Corruption of the Modernist Work’, *Postmodernism and Performance*, St. Martin’s Press, 1994: 24-46.

<sup>8</sup> The aestheticisation of the quotidian is a central tenet of many contemporary and postmodern theories of culture and is found in particularly acute forms within the work of writers such as Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard and Michel de Certeau.

<sup>9</sup> The artistry of everyday living is most persuasively theorised in de Certeau’s, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, 1984.

<sup>10</sup> Shusterman: 245.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*: 238.

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<sup>12</sup> I later return to this question of the role of fictionalisation within ethical decision making processes, see pages 44-51.

<sup>13</sup> See pages 44-58.

<sup>14</sup> Bauman: 16.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*: 17.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*: 18.

<sup>17</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, London, 1981: 109.

<sup>18</sup> Judith Butler, 'Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of "Postmodernism"', *Critical Encounters: Reference and Responsibility in Deconstructive Writing*, eds. Cathy Caruth and Deborah Esch, Rutgers University Press, 1995: 213.

<sup>19</sup> Cathy Caruth, 'Introduction: The Insistence of Reference', *Critical Encounters: Reference and Responsibility in Deconstructive Writing*, eds. Cathy Caruth and Deborah Esch, Rutgers University Press, 1995: 5. Butler's further elaborations in this mode occur in: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, 1990, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Routledge, 1993, and *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Routledge, 1997.

<sup>20</sup> Judith Butler, 'Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of "Postmodernism"', *Critical Encounters: Reference and Responsibility in Deconstructive Writing*, eds. Cathy Caruth and Deborah Esch, Rutgers University Press, 1995: 219.

<sup>21</sup> Caruth: 5.

<sup>22</sup> *Op. Cit.*: 221.

<sup>23</sup> This conflation has been made by many recent performance critics. See for instance, Birringer, Savran, and MacDonald. Notably this assumption is prevalent in critical responses to the work of



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The Wooster Group, where the performances, like many examples of deconstructive writing, are turned towards the resonance of classical texts.

<sup>24</sup> Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, Oxford, 1992, and J.

Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading*, New York, 1987.

<sup>25</sup> Miller: 13-39.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*: 23.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*: 32.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*: 33.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*: 42.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*: 43.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*: 53.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*: 15.

<sup>34</sup> Quick's notion of the sublime aesthetic appears in 'Searching for Redemption with Cardboard Wings: Forced Entertainment and the Sublime', *British Live Art: Essays and Documentations*, ed., Nick Kaye, Contemporary Theatre Review, Vol. 2 Part 2, 1994, and more extensively in his unpublished doctoral thesis, *Meaning and Language in New Performance*, University of Bristol, 1995. The initial paper on which this chapter is based was developed as a dialogue with some of Quick's notions of the sublime aesthetic.

<sup>35</sup> Miller: 45-6.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*: 5.

<sup>37</sup> Levinas's most significant articulations on the subject of ethics are found in *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, 1969, and *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, Martinus Nijhoff, 1981.

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<sup>38</sup> Critchley: 48.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*: 4.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Jill Robbins, 'Visage, Figure: Speech and Murder in Levinas's Totality and Infinity', *Critical Encounters: Reference and Responsibility in Deconstructive Writing*, eds. Cathy Caruth and Deborah Esch, Rutgers University Press, 1995: 276.

<sup>42</sup> Emanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, 1969: 50.

<sup>43</sup> Robbins: 277.

<sup>44</sup> Critchley: 5.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*: 7.

<sup>46</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Routledge 1993: 148.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*: 146.

<sup>48</sup> Tim Etchells, *Club of No Regrets*, unpublished, 1993.

<sup>49</sup> Elinor Fuchs, 'Presence and the Revenge of Writing: Re-thinking Theatre After Derrida', *Performing Arts Journal*, 26/27, Vol. IX, No.2 & 3, PAJP, 1985.

<sup>50</sup> Frederic Jameson's article on the political significance of postmodernist forms of quotation is an exemplary text in this respect. See Frederic Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', *Postmodernism and its Discontents: Theories, Practices*, ed., E. Ann Kaplan, Verso, 1988. These debates are also preeminent within the work of Philip Auslander, Hal Foster, David Harvey and Linda Hutcheon.

<sup>51</sup> Tim Etchells, unpublished interview with the author, September, 1995.

<sup>52</sup> See pages 25-36.



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<sup>53</sup> Significant works in relation to this debate are: *Principled Positions: Postmodernism and the Rediscovery of Value*, ed. Judith Squires, Lawrence and Wishart, 1993, Steven Connor, *Theory and Cultural Value*, Blackwell, 1992, *Life After Postmodernism: Essays on Value and Culture*, ed. John Fekete, Macmillan, 1988, and Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*, London, 1988.

<sup>54</sup> Kate Soper, 'Postmodernism, Subjectivity and the Question of Value', *Principled Positions: Postmodernism and the Rediscovery of Value*, ed. Judith Squires, Lawrence and Wishart, 1993: 18.

<sup>55</sup> Steven Connor, 'The Necessity of Value', *Principled Positions: Postmodernism and the Rediscovery of Value*, ed. Judith Squires, Lawrence and Wishart, 1993, and Steven Connor, *Theory and Cultural Value*, Blackwell, 1992.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*: 34.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*: 35.

<sup>58</sup> Donna Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s', *Feminism / Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson, Routledge, 1990: 202-3.

<sup>59</sup> David Harvey, 'Social Justice and the Politics of Difference', *Principled Positions: Postmodernism and the Rediscovery of Value*, ed. Judith Squires, Lawrence and Wishart, 1993: 117.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*: 36.

<sup>61</sup> Arkady Plotnitsky, 'Interpretation, Interminability, Evaluation: From Nietzsche Toward a General Economy', *Life After Postmodernism: Essays on Value and Culture*, ed. John Fekete, Macmillan, 1988: 126.

### 3. Facing the Other: The Performance Encounter and Death

Every other culture says that death begins before death, that life goes on after life, and that it is impossible to distinguish life from death. Against the representation which sees in one the term of the other, we must try to see the radical indeterminacy of life and death, and the impossibility of their autonomy in the symbolic order.<sup>1</sup>

Overnight, on the 26th June 1988, I fell ill with a virulent strain of meningitis. The meningococcal bacteria which had infected my body caused a severe headache, then photophobia, and then high fever. The presence of rashes and hypotensivity signalled that I had quickly developed anti-coagulated blood. I was taken to hospital where I was diagnosed as having acute renal failure and bilateral pneumonia. I soon lost consciousness and remained in that state for a month. Treatment involved prolonged life support with ventilation and dialysis. Parenteral and enteral nutrition were administered to counteract severe wasting. And afterwards, although I experienced some impairment of memory - a month-long 'black hole' encompassed by the images of ambulance doors closing and the emergent face of a loved one - I soon began to restore my physical strength in a self which felt indelibly changed. Some months into my recovery I visited a disquieting performance-installation, *Going Bye Byes*, by the artist Stephen Taylor Woodrow.<sup>2</sup> In this work the spectator enters an apparently unpopulated room to find a series of hospital beds. On approaching each bed the spectator is met by the sight of an animate yet somehow severed human face sunken into the pillow.



Though a visit to a gallery and a critical illness are radically different experiences, since that day, these two events have become so intertwined for me, that it is now difficult to address one without invoking the other. This chapter will begin then, by exploring the unavoidable reciprocity of this artwork to my own experience of illness, not simply in order to trace out the frame of my authorship, but also to illuminate the relationship between experiences marked by death's immanence and their necessary recurrence. I will outline some conceptual frameworks relating to the social, institutional and psychological imperative to exclude the symbolic force of death. From this outline I will argue through a close reading of Taylor Woodrow's performance-installation that a specific set of aesthetic tactics operate on its spectators in order to provoke an encounter with alterity. I will argue that this work seeks to remind its spectators that they are revenants, by returning them once again to a space which seems both familiar and unknown, the uncanny space of death. In exploring this reciprocity between an event and its reminder, the repressed and its return, I will move the analysis of performance as an encounter with alterity from the Other in general to the particular Other of death. Consequently, I hope to pose some questions on the role of performance within the representation of death and dying in Western culture. Within this context, I will examine the opportunities offered by liminal forms to resist representations which affirm the social and psychological imperative to exclude the experience and thought of death, and the underlying logic of this exclusion which hopes to dissociate death from life.

## *Logics of Exclusion*

The violent separation of death from life is seen by Jean Baudrillard in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* as the foundation on which the history of Western rational thought is built.<sup>3</sup>

For Baudrillard, all forms of reproduction, whether intellectual, industrial or biological, arise from the attempt to ascribe absolute value to life in the face of its negation through death. Death is then subject to an attempted and repeated purging from symbolic circulation in the hope of enshrining life as positivity. The logic of exclusion leads to the extradition of the dead and the dying from the normative centre of the conception of the Human in culture. Baudrillard's thought effectively proposes that our society stages a failed collective repression of death which necessarily returns to haunt us in the symbolic sphere, leading to his assertion that nevertheless, "we live in a culture of death".<sup>4</sup> Death remains, as life's positive symbolic status is utterly dependent on death's presence as negativity. For Baudrillard these specific conceptions, lodged deep in the logic of Western thought, are to be countered through an understanding in which death exists in an indivisible unity with life: "Death is not a due payment, it is a nuance of life; or, life is a nuance of death".<sup>5</sup>

This essentially Freudian understanding of the place of death within cultural formations can be corroborated through recent anthropological and sociological works which seek to outline human action and social organisation in relation to the force of death. Studies such as Zygmunt Bauman's *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, share the understanding of cultural production and its social organisation as originating in a



defensive reaction to the threat of mortality.<sup>6</sup> Significantly in both Baudrillard and Bauman's distinct understandings of death's cultural resonance, spatial and temporal orders play a profound structural role. For Baudrillard the attempted symbolic expulsion of death is manifested in the organisation of social space, where the dead and the dying are physically removed to peripheral sites; the cemetery is thus seen as the ur-ghetto. Bauman further argues that this banishment from physical presence and sight is part of a wider organising logic of spatial separation which seeks to "manage" death's threat through the persistent creation of *distance*.

Bauman, following a Levinasian epistemology, argues that Modern societies are predicated on "survival strategies" which frequently involve the temporary resolution of death's threat through *objecthood*, by which he means the fixing of that which eludes understanding and explanation into identifiable and knowable objects. Objecthood, in its drawing in to the field of the rationally explicable is a condition which implies the establishment of containment through place, name and identity. Beyond the simple (and doomed) exclusionary imperative which justifies spatial separation from the dead, this mastery through objecthood, whether manifested in the sanitising placement of bodies that too closely signal the inevitability of mortality (the aged, the ill, the 'mad'), the naming of 'solvable' illnesses, or the identification of their attributable 'causes', allows death's alterity to be temporarily withheld. As Bauman notes,

Objects [...] stay, reassuringly within human reach and [the] human capacity to act. One can submit them to purposeful, planned, consistent, effective, *rational* treatment.<sup>7</sup>

The creation of distance and the resolution into objecthood can thus be seen as psycho-social mechanisms built in resistance to, and predicated on the exclusion of, a fundamentally threatening alterity.

In correlation with these spatial materialisations of death's immaterial force, Modern Western culture supports a specific conception of temporality which is similarly concerned to sustain a binary and stable distinction between life and death. For Baudrillard, the polarisation of the two terms is upheld by the imposition of a linear time frame in which life is seen as progressive accumulation and death as the distinct endpoint, life's result and annulment. This conception, in which the past is that which passage has discarded, and the transient present is of utility only in its passing towards a coming attainment, upholds specific understandings of value and meaning. In its linear thrust towards futurity, this perception of time is one in which the 'now time' is less meaningful and is constantly devalued in relation to a fuller 'later time'. Whilst the negativity of death is the ultimate end point of this trajectory, its annihilating force is constantly deferred through an accumulative 'promise'. Value and meaning are consequently determined through their participation in a project which, whilst in positive process, is yet to be fulfilled.

Hence, Bauman's depiction of Modern culture, is one which is constituted through a perpetual "forgetting" of mortality; to exist at all, culture, founded on value and meaning, embodies a certain substantiality which seems to escape life's transience, and thus attains a kind of "extemporality".<sup>8</sup> In its continuance beyond the life of the individuals and societies which create it, in its perpetual evolution, culture at least promises a transcendence which



exceeds the time of the individual and society. Most importantly, for both Bauman and Baudrillard, these spatial, perceptual and temporal formations are inevitably marked by impossibility and failure: Modern culture is founded on, and engaged with unsustainable strategies of *death deferral*. Bauman concurs with Baudrillard's diagnosis of "a culture of death", noting death's unceasing return, the persistence of time's ephemerality and the "porousness of cemetery walls".<sup>9</sup>

The paradox of death's cultural presence is similarly evident in the context of transformations in Western societal practices around dying bodies and actual deaths. The recent history of these practices is one in which the public, social and communal process of dying has been increasingly privatised. Whilst secularisation has diminished the authority of religious establishments to control the social reality of death, the dying have been submitted to the institutional power of advanced medicine, which has removed the ailing body from public space into the hospital, where the rituals marking death's passage are individualised and managed through medical discourse. Analysis of these rituals confirms Baudrillard's assertion of the contemporary logic which seeks to distinguish death from life, and further, confirms the means through which social and symbolic power are correlates of this distinction.<sup>10</sup> Following Van Gennep's assertion that in the death rite both the bereaved and the deceased inhabit an interstitial space "between the world of the living and the world of the dead", the *intersubjective* and *liminal* nature of death's process is apparent.<sup>11</sup> Both the mourner and the dead are involved in a prolonged diverging transitional passage between their respective worlds, beyond the terms of the biological dying. Significantly, this period of change is one in which the identities of the participants

are called into question as they experience a levelling dissolution of social status and power. Dominant medical practices seek to foreshorten this process, to replace transition with separation, to extract dying from the social realm into the isolated realm of the individual, where death's threat seems personalised and historically unique. This management of social relations around dying can be seen as a reification of social status and exclusionary identity driven by denial.

Identity loss in the face of death's immanence is resisted and countered by institutional medical practices which seek to maintain self-solidity whilst at the same time managing the instability and transformation of bodies. In a contest in which rational analysis is pitted against the elusive 'logic' of flesh, if the body's mastery is a source of doubt, then at least the subject can be known. Though I have no memory of these events, it was just before I became unconscious in the confusion of being admitted to intensive care, that I was asked if I would consent to an HIV test. Doubtful about the motivation behind this request and its relevance to the firm diagnosis of meningitis, I managed to articulate a "no", before losing it. This careless refusal to submit my body to that particular categorization created an aporia which led to a series of disputes over my treatment between my lover, my family and the hospital. Whilst I was unconscious one particular consultant made repeated requests to my parents to allow what he called "the AIDS test". A lung infection which I had developed was common in cases of AIDS, in which case testing may prove personally and even medically significant, perhaps meningitis would be identified as a new opportunistic infection within the syndrome. A lack of clarity over my anti-body status would lead the hospital to incur unnecessary expense, further protective measures would



have to be employed, complex machinery would have to be rigorously cleaned. For the sake of the nurses in daily contact with my body fluids, for their physical safety and peace of mind, it would be better to know if I had “got the virus”.

These shifts in spurious justification, from the authoritative medical to the ethical financial to the operational emotive, were eventually superseded by an embarrassing accidental admission: I had in fact been tested without consent, expressly against the wishes of my lover and family. A personal and epistemological anxiety over anti-body status had been resolved in what was technically an illegal act. The refusal to test had created an uncertainty. A response was needed which would fix this body in its own particular slide into negativity with a stable positive signification, thus aligning, in an assumptive logic, the wavering body with a known identity. I was subject to a particularly transgressive and improper decline, my body's potential death cut against the dominant narrative trajectories of my social identity. Robert Kastenbaum's categorizations of appropriate or “safe” deaths within contemporary culture had all been crossed.<sup>12</sup> I was not elderly: this was not to be a timely death, a due payment. I would not silently and peacefully slip away. I would not die without risk to others or wider implication, not quickly in a cost-efficient manner, nor would it be a clean death without premature decomposition. I would not exemplify resistant mental clarity, alert and conscious to the last. This immanent death which I did not choose to produce, this *other* unsafe gay death did not arise from an appropriate cause, or a disease befitting my identity. An inseparable association of gay identity with AIDS related illness is the hidden organizing thought behind these institutional practices within a logic which seeks partial compensation from the threat of

death. When an illness contravenes social death codes and identity trajectories it demands re-inscription in a more suited fatality by the binding of bodily events to fixed identities.

Caught in a micro-pattern of the social logics of exclusion, the individual ailing body inevitably submits to the managerial logics of the hospital. Here, the orders of space and time, the direction of ritual behaviour and the creation and maintenance of the body-as-object conform to a logic which defensively seeks to draw boundaries against death. After I left intensive care, I was placed on my own in an empty ward. A little quarantine. A special room for a cheat. This place had a stultifying interior stillness, glassed in from a visible world, moving outside and past me with an uncaring punctuality. I had an unmistakable sense of designed punishment in this place, as if the aim was to re-experience in consciousness the 'separation' I had just escaped. From my fixed and prone perspective I could see only a neat row of empty beds marked by stillness and propriety. And since there was no hint of a coming body, no sense in which these blank slabs would ever be used, they presented to me a future which I had somehow interrupted, a proper post-death state in which I would be absent; a scene now perturbed by my unwelcome presence. This room-scape of absence, this placement within an isolated site which holds-off against re-entry into the social world, conforms to the logic which seeks separation and distance from death by keeping its unruly alterity always elsewhere. Seclusion is a preface to exclusion, a failed or coming expulsion.

Human action in such contexts is not simply affirming in its relationship to the organisation of space or its founding logic. Rather, action both cuts against and succumbs



to the determinations and restrictions of place: appropriate behaviours and operational necessities are both obeyed and transgressed. Yet, in hospital, the order of time is carefully guarded and kept. The temporal disruptions and slips which illness and chemical imbalance provide, are countered by the regular marking of time through regimented actions and events. Time's linearity, its very succession, is defensively upheld, whether the individual's trajectory is seen as curative or fatal. In the ailing, time slides, and is often not experienced as accumulation or as a passage towards. They gave me a button to signal for attention, whenever biological need superseded the 'necessity' of division. In a place in which their order of space and time sought to master my body, the one connection linking my will to the process of events, was a sign system whose affectivity I could not guarantee. The buzzer which the button activated was in another place. I could not be sure of my signal's reception. From beneath the sheets I feel time slipping and stalling; simultaneously condensed and extended; interminable in its continuation yet somehow absent or suspended. I struggle to encounter and correspond to the institutional duplicate 'everyday' time, and my recognition of its pattern is taken as an index of my re-entry into proper consciousness and the social world.

In critical illness appropriate patienthood requires not only a giving up of the body to another time but also a giving over to objecthood. Measured, scanned and subjected, the body becomes a property of rational thought. Supported, treated, supplemented, drained and injected the failing body is acted on. In the grip of medical discourse the body's very existence is determined through its facility as *that which is operated upon*: the body is constituted as the scene of determining perceptions and actions. After I regained

consciousness I was due to be transferred from the intensive care ward. A consultant entered my curtained room and following a series of observations on my progress, he announced that he felt I was out of danger: that death's threat had passed.<sup>13</sup> He said he would like to introduce me to all the specialists who had worked on my care during my critical time. Sweeping back the curtain he revealed a small crowd of staring, white-coated medical staff. As my examination proceeded, it became apparent that this was not so much an experience of being on stage, but rather an experience in which my body had become the stage: the scenic object of a professional audience. I was surrounded by body technicians; an authoritative audience whose powers of interpretation and naming far exceeded the object of scrutiny. In this moment I was struck by a sense of another loss. Re-reading and re-membling this time, this was not simply the experience of a material loss, of physically giving over my body to the care of others, but a second, somehow more substantial loss: a giving over of my body to an anatomising vision.

Whether through defensively sought identity, spatial extradition, temporal control or the 'resolution' of objecthood, contemporary social organisation and cultural formations attempt to close the liminality of experiences marked by death's immanence. These social and cultural orders are the apparatus of a logic of exclusion founded on the maintenance of an absolute and binary distinction between death and life. Baudrillard contends that the division into two terms instigates relations of power and social difference: "All the agencies of repression and control are installed in this divided space".<sup>14</sup>



## *Death's Immanence in Liminal Forms*

Taylor Woodrow's installation offers a significant resistance to the logic of the binary separation through a set of aesthetic tactics which bring the spectator into a particular relation with death. The principal effect of these formulations is the establishment of the spectator as an inhabitant of a liminal space in an indeterminate duration. The work takes as its scenic source two institutional sites, the gallery and the hospital, and resolves these places into a mobile space, calling into question the associated propriety and functions of both places. The gallery, as a place of distance and exhibition, objectification, rarefied commodity, voluntary attendance, intellectual and spiritual advancement, meets the hospital, a place of intimacy and privacy, subject attention, essential presence, physical repair and cure, technological and rational mastery.

In common with many other contemporary aesthetic practices, the distinction between the worlds of art and non-art is disturbed in this bringing together of antithetical significations. This coalescence of antagonistic meanings is customary in installation, whose very form is itself composite; the form is marked by a history of hybrid experimentation between sculpture, architecture, performance, painting, music and theatre in which the definition of art boundaries has persistently been in dispute. As such installation can be seen as inherently interdisciplinary and as a form whose identity is already open to question. This uncertainty within the ontology of installation is undoubtedly a key element in the spectatorial experience of such works. I will argue that the open question of what the work is or is not, is a dilemma with which the spectator of installation is necessarily

engaged. This opening of the question of ontology, which has been described by Andrew Benjamin as definitional of installation, like the Levinasian opening of ontology within orders of representation which I have previously discussed, can be seen as a problematisation of the object status of the artwork which disrupts its relation with its Other.<sup>15</sup>

Taylor Woodrow's piece is not concerned with a relationship to, or a disruption of, an existing single non-art context or place. Place in this piece remains at the level of association, it is intimated by the work, but this suggestion does not find a representation. The installation does not attempt to capture a replete environment, but is comprised of 'objects' which indicate and lend resonance to a surrounding space. This inference of place is never freed from a sense of dislocation. The hospital bed is displaced from the (non-art) context in which its meanings were comfortably enmeshed. Though it carries this set of meanings, it is required to re-signify in an alien (art) context. The now included is still marked by its previous exclusion. Like Marcel Duchamp's ready-made, the bed once existed in a sphere of secure meanings and identifiable functions, but once the object is torn from its appropriate context its claim to determine its own or its surrounding identity is thrown into question. In this work place is not materialised, its potential arises from the projection of 'damaged' objects. Consequently the visitor's experience is akin to inhabiting the dreamscape where charged symbolic fragments prevail, proposing a sense of place in a space of fluid and indeterminate identity.<sup>16</sup> The exclusionary organisation of place, which both Bauman and Baudrillard identified as a protective measure against the alterity of death, is rescinded here. The boundaries of the hospital, the culturally



designated place of death, here dissolve into other social spaces. This is neither gallery, nor hospital, nor graveyard, nor nursery, but an interstitial space moving between these possibilities.

In relation to the hospital ( the 'proper' place of its objects) Taylor Woodrow's piece can be seen as a rupturing of its cultural designation through a reduction of its status to the level of imagined place. However the experience of spectatorship within the piece itself is one of a collision of the imagined and the real, an inhabitation of a mobile space marked by a sense of impropriety and disjunction.<sup>17</sup> Here the effects of the dis-placement and de-institutionalisation of the nucleus of meanings that constitute 'the hospital' are certainly felt. This ploy brings the spectator into contact with an experience which has been liberated from the ingrained institutional operations of place. There is a sense, not of the erasure of the meanings and functions of the hospital, but of their opening to question through displacement. It is notable that whilst the gallery maintains its function as a social space, this does not engender the presence of shared and confirmed perceptions for the spectators around how to act. The faltering and hesitant movements of the visitors to the gallery and the reported wild diversity of responses, attest to physical uncertainty born from the removal of known co-ordinates of behavioural orientation. This is a space in which physical relation has to be re-learned.

If the presence of the work disturbs the spectator's expectations around their own role and function as spectator, it troubles further by its situation of the visitor as a participant in a shifting ritual structure. In keeping with the work's dislocation, the visitor is engaged in a

repetitive pattern of spectatorship which exists between, and is reminiscent of, differing rites of passage. Here gallery viewing is redetermined, as the movement to the bed evokes the visitation of the ill, the habitual return to a place of sleep, the attendance at the grave. As a condition of their presence, the spectator is called to make a negotiation of these associations, etched in somatic and spatial memory, in their physical passage through the space. This demand on the spectator is not only one which invokes the intermingling of determinate places within the spectators work of reading, but also establishes an instability in the temporal location of this work. The present experience of the work is one which seems both unfamiliar (new) and familiar (recollected) since the physical act of spectatorship is saturated with an indeterminate ritual history.

In common with many other installation practices Taylor Woodrow further complicates the time dynamics of the work by establishing a temporal flow within the space which can be distinguished from the time of spectatorship.<sup>18</sup> Significantly the witnessing of the work is conditioned by experiencing the interaction of these contiguous times. Whilst the process of *spectatorship* seems relatively unprescribed - within the opening hours you may enter and leave as you wish - the time of *the space*, its very continuation, is autonomous. Consequently the spectator is aware of a contradictory temporal pull, the time of *the work* seems at once to be controllable and determined by the spectator yet independent of, and exceeding the spectator's time. Here, the notion of the work being completed by the spectator's presence, or even of the work being fully witnessed, is confounded, since the witnessed time of the work is always disrupted by the knowledge of its irrepressible incompleteness *as a time*. Witnessing becomes an experience of the failure to fully



witness the work.<sup>19</sup> Time itself is experienced as both a personal limit and as a force in excess of the subject. The ending of the time of the work is both absolutely assured and without certainty, since it cannot be witnessed. This kind of temporal inscription is unique to the combination of continuous human action with material installation, and should be distinguished from automated installation works which, whilst using temporal flows that exceed the time of spectatorship, sustain a sense of unambiguous assurance of their ‘stasis’ after being left, since the installation has a locked temporality given by mechanical repetition.<sup>20</sup> Through the incorporation of live performance the time of the work is marked as a duration, but one without a verifiable narrative or closure. The notion of time as progress toward an end, as linear fulfillment, is thus challenged with an experience of time as an impossible project of attainment. Here, time is experienced *as loss*. Such a temporal structure is radically different from the understanding of time as accumulation which Bauman identifies as an organising thought of Modern cultural formations.

The nature of this work’s challenge to aesthetic and cultural value via this temporal play can be seen through time’s relationship to the presentation of action within performance. In his examination of a broad spectrum of “postmodern aesthetic performance”, Karl Toepfer seeks to identify a set of aesthetic “temporal-spatial strategies” linked by the notion of appropriation.<sup>21</sup> Toepfer, following Lyotard, contends that the Modernist understanding of aesthetic value is determined by a meta-narrative of time as a progress towards “a condition of freedom based on notions of specialization and difference between arts, artists and artistic movements”.<sup>22</sup> As I have already argued, this conception of time as progress is intimately linked to a cultural denial of death. A “postmodern attitude” is



distinguished by Toepfer as one which, rather than perceiving artistic progress as based on the discovery of ever new forms, is concerned with the “synthesis and integration” of existing forms and multiple histories. For Toepfer this shift in “attitude” profoundly disturbs the project of the subject and the nature of “motives for action”. This disturbance is evidenced in the way in which the relationship between time and action is re-figured within contemporary performances. Four strategies of temporal-spatial appropriation are outlined: occurrence (scheduling at times deemed improper by the social order); duration (extension or contraction of the ‘proper’ time span of the work); segmentation (the cutting up of the work into elements which are rearranged in unique time sequences in specific contexts); and interaction (the representation and juxtaposition of discrete times within the work).

Taylor Woodrow’s performance-installation might seem to fit smoothly within Toepfer’s second strategy of duration, as it extends beyond the spans considered proper for ‘aesthetic performance’ in everyday social organisation. Whilst arguing that protraction of the time of a work signals an effort to appropriate time, Toepfer touches on a problematic of ‘the durational strategy’ which leads him to question its potential to challenge master narratives. He argues that extended duration may lead to a failure to question the subordination of action to narrative, since it inevitably carries associations of epic struggle and endurance, which imply that narrative is waiting behind the extension of action. I will later return to the question of the relationship between action and time, in order to present a somewhat different analysis of the specific ways in which performance may come to problematise notions of temporal progress.<sup>23</sup> For the moment it is important to note that



whilst Taylor Woodrow's piece is durational, and could be described as a work of endurance, it does not succumb to recuperation within notions of progress. In *Going Bye Byes* the temporal protraction cannot be seen to be reinscribed within narrative since the work's duration is marked as not fully witnessable: extension is not resolved in an eventual comforting cessation. Action in this work is similarly unresolved. The action's relation to the time of the work coincides to the extent that it happens within its time span. However it is difficult to speak of the work in terms of a commonsense notion of action since that action which takes place hovers at the border of the definition of action. The performance is a facial micro-choreography of movements, coming in and out of attention and presence within the space. Toepfer's conceptual framework of appropriation falls somewhat short of naming such aesthetic ploys. Here, time and action are not simply possessed and re-ordered, they are marked by an irresolvable indeterminacy.

Most significantly, this indeterminacy is played out through the use of a specific employment of the body in performance which disrupts the relation of action and time and in turn the spectator's experience of time as progress. The body here - face becoming object - is caught in repetitious twitches and responses, as if it were somehow rehearsing its relation to us, or re-staging its memories. As in the work of other contemporary performance makers such as Forced Entertainment and Goat Island, the work constitutes and displays performance *as repetition*, a re-staging of events which, for the acting subject, persistently evade explanation and conscious mastery. Forced Entertainment's forever failing systematic performance of crudely realised cinematic deaths in *Let the Water Run its Course*, or Goat Island's re-animation of wounding memory fragments

through gestural, spatial and textual forms in *It's Shifting, Hank* present to us a body that is falling out of linear time. Physical action whether in the more fully embodied works of these companies, or in this micro-choreography of the face, is non-progressive. This body in *extremis* is locked in a non-generative movement, never fully surpassing or recovering the absent originary event which it evidently repeats.

Those spatial and temporal orderings which Baudrillard and Bauman identify within the social realm as operating an exclusionary protection against the force of death find themselves radically opened within the aesthetic of *Going Bye Byes*. Death, no longer distant, is brought into immanence within the liminal form of the work. The culturally designated place of death is dispersed into the spectator's social space. Temporal progress, which held death in a suspended future, is replaced by an experience of time constituted as loss. Action which is mastered by an accumulative temporal order falls into a non-progressive funk. Standing frozen in this space, the disruption of place, the evocation of multiple rituals, and the indeterminacy of the duration of the work, combine to shape my spectatorial experience as one of a crisis of volition. Whilst I think I know where I am I do not know how to act. Whilst knowing I am free to leave I nevertheless feel that I am in the grip of a process beyond my control. As I experience this work, do I act autonomously or am I driven?



## *Uncanny Occurrences and Repetition*

The powerful hold of the installation over its visitor, which I have so far examined as a consequence of its liminality, can be illuminated further through an understanding of the psychic structures within which the work is created and received. Freud's elaboration of a category of ambivalent experience, where objects or events or texts inspire a sensation of uncanniness, begins to mark out the operation of these psychic forces and the potential, within aesthetic ploys, to resist the consignment of death to a place of inaccessible alterity.<sup>24</sup> The contradiction which an uncanny object or event embodies, the simultaneous feeling of familiarity and unfamiliarity, arises for Freud through the recurrence of a thought which has previously been repressed. In particular, the uncanny presages death, the unconscionable thought of the ego's inevitable destruction.

For Freud, the most significant factor in a cluster of associated conditions leading to an uncanny experience, is that the object in question causes a crisis of belief over its ontological status; in particular there is a profound dilemma over whether the object is real or imagined. Freud favoured the power of the uncanny in reality. His privileging of the uncanny in the everyday, over the uncanny experienced when reading a text, builds from his use of literary examples primarily drawn from genres of the fantastic which do not readily admit articulations problematizing the foundational coherence of their imagined worlds. However, his distinction between the experience of reality and of reading, usefully emphasises that the uncanny occurrence is dependent on an effect of "reality-

testing” or in reading, a moment in which a representational system breaks down.

Following a linguistic turn, these two things are synonymous.<sup>25</sup>

An irresolvable ontological tension is an integral part of Taylor Woodrow’s installation.

The visitor encounters something which is not what it at first appears to be. The realisation of the work’s duplicity only arises through a closer inspection. The physical movement towards the concealed face of the work secures the spectator’s passage from a position in which the object identity of the work seems stable, to a close engagement with an object whose material object status is in question. The immortal reassurance of objecthood is denied. Reversing the direction and flow of sight in the gallery, the ‘object’ looks back. In this procession from objectification to subjective interaction, the spectator is made aware of their own failure of vision and the necessity of revising their gaze. This need to revise is disturbing since the initial challenge to the verity of the subject’s sight inspires an irresolvable crisis around the authority of sight itself, which is further sustained by the continued indeterminacy of the object’s status. The work has no stable being and consequently offers no security of vision to the spectator. The discovered face which instigated the breach in appearances, itself appears to be receding out of the field of vision. Once the face is admitted to sight it is not easy to resolve the work into the comforting binary definitions of object-performance, inanimate-animate.

Whilst it is possible to rationalise the work, to find security in a sensible explanation of the work’s contrivance, to think of it as a person in a box, this is to attempt to see one aspect of the work as discrete from its other aspect. Yet this solution is never fully evident and



verifiable. Its contemplation leads to a tangle of imagined technicalities in which the unbearable experience of containment and the fear of unavoidable biological functions loom large. Such attempts at mastery of the work's uncanny force, entail a mental rehearsal of, and identification with, the performer's physical discomfort and pain. All of these effects are concurrent with a dilated encounter with death. Most importantly to believe in the presence of an intact actual body is to admit against appearances, that what seems real is illusion, or to believe in a reality that is not available to sight.

In his exploration of the uncanny Freud locates the confusion of the real and the imagined as an aspect of childhood experience.<sup>26</sup> In particular he refers to the common inability of children to distinguish between living and dead matter. This lack of distinction is best exemplified through the treatment of dolls which, for children, have an uncertainty over their object status. Taylor Woodrow's installation embodies a similar indeterminacy in its bringing together of the animate and inanimate. The face within the pillow appears as an actual personification of the object. With its connotation of nursery and its use of old furnishing the piece creates another temporal indeterminacy: a sense of regression and a return to an early past; a scene in which the death life binary is not yet firmly established.<sup>27</sup>

The troubling of the binary which the installation enacts is enhanced through its use of a formal repetition of the sites of encounter between the spectator and the work. In his writing on the uncanny Freud began to elaborate the power of repetition to evoke this phenomena and its relation to the force of death.<sup>28</sup> He saw repetition as the ego's attempted protection against death and related this to the figure of the double, exemplified



through the ‘immortal soul’; a self repetition designed to stave off the inevitable destruction of the body. However, Freud notes that the double becomes “the uncanny harbinger of death” and that the presence of repetition invariably signals something “fateful and inescapable”.<sup>29</sup> Like the uncanny, repetition is always both new and old, different and the same, unfamiliar and familiar, unknown and known. In an aesthetic, repetition is the further appearance of a once recognised form, a familiar reoccurrence. Yet in its reoccurrence, the form is differentiated through its secondarity and its very status as a re-production. The repetition is always locked in a relationship with thing it repeats. As Bronfen argues in her writing on repeated love objects, this means that “difference, deferral and belatedness find themselves inscribed in the relation of the second term to the first”.<sup>30</sup> Whilst the second term seems to enact a forgetting of the first term, it is always haunted by the remembrance of that which it repeats. Thus, as Bronfen states, “repetition describes a longing for an identity between two terms even as it stages the impossibility of literal identity”.<sup>31</sup>

Bronfen usefully invokes Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s distinction between constructive and destructive repetitions.<sup>32</sup> The distinction begins to lay out the operation of the psychic force of death and its implications for an understanding of the way in which, within an aesthetic, repetition can summon death as an immanent power. For Rimmon-Kenan, a repetition which emphasises its difference from the thing it repeats is seen as productive in that it successfully masters the threat of dissolution which it sought to escape. However a repetition which only results in emphasising similarity to that which it repeats, fails in its attempted mastery of this threat. Rimmon-Kenan argues that the latter form of repetition



is thus destructive, in its failure to articulate its difference and distance it is, in effect, a “complete repetition” which presages death and is “beyond life and beyond narrative”.<sup>33</sup>

The repetition which repeats too effectively does not escape death because it returns to the same threatened situation, it does not re-establish the progress of time (life and narrative). In this context, whether or not it effects an adequate deferral of death, repetition emerges as death-bound. As Freud argues elsewhere, repetition always contains this irresolvable tension.<sup>34</sup> Although it is designed to shore up the psyche, the compulsion to repeat is based on a need for stability and stasis, a halting of temporality; it is a regressive movement which seeks an earlier condition without time and division and is thus, paradoxically, a movement towards death. Bronfen succinctly summarises this point when she asserts that “repetition is the process underlying life’s detour toward death in an effort to avoid a fatal short-circuit”.

If the subject within its habitual economies seeks objects which insure against its self-dissolution from the threat of death and destructive alterities, then this work is concerned with frustrating this quest by repeatedly opening representation to its banished Other. The entire piece assumes the force of a repeated return. This repetition is both within the object and the spectatorial experience: it constitutes the work. As I spectate, I repeatedly meet the face of death. Death presented, death remembered. My death. I see myself outside of myself. Each bed is different, each the same. Moving through this installation I am death-bound, for whilst each repeated bed offers difference, its distance is predicated on a relation with that which I am required to leave: death presented, death re-membered. More of the same. A destructive oversameness. I see myself outside of myself. I see

myself now bound into then. I want a representation which will master its referent, which will fix me and fix my death. I want to see the end. I want the image to be still, the illness to be known. But it goes on repeating, eating at me.

### ***The Black Hole and the Trauma***

The pull of this work is, then, an index of its ability to conjure death's immanence. Beyond the awareness that I am not simply looking at this piece, that I am interacting with it and consequently am a part of the work, there is a sense in which my presence is not just integrated but demanded and necessary. The work is insistent in its relationship with its spectator.<sup>35</sup> This is not an experience in which I can safely claim an empowered position of mobile spectatorship. I am overwhelmed. Against my knowledge, I perceive that I am not free to see this work, to move imaginatively, consciously, physically as I wish. I am drawn in by this piece and my relation to it is sustained through a compulsion. Once inside this space, to experience the work, I am pulled into a repetitive pattern of spectatorship: I must move in a serial motion, to give my attention to multiple beds, searching difference across sameness. And like Freud, locked in an ambivalent, perpetual return to his "painted women", I find myself returning helplessly again and again to be with this work, without being able to finally know why.<sup>36</sup> My inability to determine the location of the compulsion is coextensive with an inability to locate death outside or inside the psyche.



To be taken by this work, to succumb to its attraction, is an entrapment analogous to the experience of trauma, where the subject is possessed by a recurring image or event.

Trauma arises through the subject's inability to fully comprehend and assimilate the physical and psychic significance of the event within which s/he is involved, in the time of the happening. This event is thus marked as a void or 'black hole' in cognition.

Consequently the truth of the event can only be accessed belatedly, through its reminder which persists against the will of the subject as a haunting recurrence. It is this blank gap and its possession of the subject which leads writers on personal testimony, such as Laub and Caruth, to place at the heart of their account of trauma, an irresolvable crisis of "knowledge and memory".<sup>37</sup> The traumatised subject is caught in an impossible demand to recall and master an event of which s/he was not fully cognisant. In relation to the narrative potential of traumatic events, this leads Caruth to conclude "the force of this experience would appear to arise precisely [...] in the collapse of its understanding."<sup>38</sup>

I remember a hospital sequence when I am still heavily wired up. It is a day when I am flitting in and out of consciousness. I just retreat inside my head. And everything that is me or is connected to me stops. Still silence. Outside the glass of my perception there are alarms and people acting decisively, efficiently. Was it my heart that stopped beating or was it my breath ceasing? I can't say. But the moment is with me still. Mute biology. Body gone, still. Pure seeing without breath or pulse. And I remember thinking, these are the last moments now, these moments. They were filled with emptiness and nothing.

## *Writing Facing Death*

In my reading of this work the installation takes as its referent a particular illness symptomatic of a wider address to the physical experience of pain and the human process of death inside life. In the face of this subject Taylor Woodrow makes a liminal work in which the participant-spectator is bound by an impossible necessity, a duty to an inaccessible referent. I too find myself falling between two places, between a critical illness and a performance-installation, between languages appropriate to both events. This writing also proceeds through necessity, for it is only in the trace of the event, in its recurrence, that the potential of its 'full knowing' arises. I am trapped by the logic of repetition. The experience of my near death becomes accessible through its reappearance in the particular form of the performance-installation. As Caruth argues, "since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time."<sup>39</sup> And what of the alterior significance of the performance-installation itself? Is it not also, only partially experienced in the time of its happening, beyond the full cognition of its participant-spectators? This writing, then, is also this event's dependent recurrence, its psychic return. And if trauma is a necessary repeated suffering of an unknowable event, then to the extent that it is not willed, this critical writing is the trauma of a performance.

Towards the end of *Teratologies*, a meditation on the author's ovarian cancer and its enculturation, Jackie Stacey posits a series of seemingly irresolvable possibilities around the question of writing's relationship to death.<sup>40</sup> Writing, she suggests, may become a



means of re-establishing linearity for a traumatised body. The survivor's body is, by definition, a body in a state of prolepsis: it has 'known' death before its time. Whilst such a condition maybe particular to the understanding of the survivor, it is worth noting, as Derrida has discussed, that for the subject death is always inherently premature, in the sense that its arrival can never be fully owned.<sup>41</sup> To write on the body's near death, Stacey suggests, is perhaps a responsive production; an attempt to restore through the concrete and progressive form of narrative, a linearity lost in the death shadowed body. As such, writing succumbs to the necessity of self preservation: it keeps death's alterity at bay. Yet Stacey proffers a deliberate ambivalence over writing's possible operations on the alterity of death, refusing to close the question of writing as wounding remembrance or writing as restorative forgetting. Since writing, in this context, is a repetition of traumatic events, this tension would seem irresolvable; such a writing both returns to, and escapes from, the source of its impulse.

Yet, as I have argued, the opening of representation to its alterities is a matter of ethical and epistemological significance. In this chapter, I have insisted on the potential of a series of liminal formal ploys (spatial, temporal and somatic) to open a relation with the unknown Other. The question of this ethical demand must also be posed to critical writing and performance theory. How might the subject write, not *on* death, but *facing* death? Such a question lies within Stacey's moving testimony. If Stacey's theoretical framework is undecided on writing's ability to open itself to the alterity of death, her writing itself, in its structure and rendition, performs a different articulation: one concerned with a vigilance towards mortality. Perhaps this care, as in Stacey's work, should be principally



expressed as an incredulity towards the survival narrative. Survival narratives, utilising a progressive trajectory, invariably speak prematurely from beyond death's threat. Writing facing death might then require an interrogation of this structure, within which it would nonetheless be implicated, in the instance of its address. Such a writing would become a resistance to the authority which death's immanence has lent to the author. This articulation would certainly require a writing of the author, not as a re-solidified figure, but instead as a subject bent towards disappearance. Such a writing is necessarily an expression of the self in dissolution, a liminal writing between autobiography and something *else*.

In this examination of a thanatography's textual operations on the body, Stacey opens a wider question on the effects of narrativity in general in relation to bodily experience. How does this questioning of the operation of narrativity bear on the performance encounter with the alterity of death? Through his readings of contemporary fiction Mark Ledbetter has defined the narrative-body relationship in expressly politicised terms, as a silencing of the voices of bodies that do not conform to the 'ideologies' of narrative.<sup>42</sup> Whilst the object of his criticism is quite distinct, in common with Stacey, Ledbetter wishes to uncover that understanding or experience which narrative, in its very operations, seeks to suppress. In Stacey's terms this suppressed experience is a bodily condition of living non-survival, in Ledbetter's terms the suppression is more generally a silencing of the voice of the differing subject. Ledbetter perceives such disqualified voices as the literal victims of narrative. Narrative is thus seen as an imposing form which seeks to organise experience according to its own internal and always operative governing



‘ideologies’. Though Ledbetter does not express the relation in such terms, I would like to suggest that narratives principal ‘ideology’, or more acutely its *ontology*, is that of incessant temporal progress. Ledbetter’s readings of contemporary fiction are concerned to elaborate the means through which narrative disallows particular voices and to mark and uncover those voices. Such voices are often not fully suppressed and consequently are not wholly absent from the text: they often ‘speak’ through a palpable silence or a ghostly presence.<sup>43</sup> Their voice and their embodiment within narrative is often bought through a peripheral appearance as “the violated, the mutilated, the diseased” subject.

Thus Ledbetter asserts that

the literary text, itself an embodied event, best reveals an ethic of its own making - through writing and reading - when we discover and explore, *within the narrative’s language*, violence imposed on the body as text - a violence that disrupts the text’s ‘master plot’, a violence that is most startlingly revealed through examination of the violation imposed on the character’s bodies within the text.  
[my italics]<sup>44</sup>

Consequently Ledbetter proffers readings which are attentive to the moments within narratives where narrative progress, consistency and focus break down. Such textual aporias are associated with moments within the fiction when a physical, mental or emotional violence is made manifest. Ledbetter describes these textual markers as “narrative scars”: places where an alterior understanding intrudes upon and marks the coherency of the text.<sup>45</sup>

Ledbetter’s analysis is useful here in its identification of physical violation within the fictional realm as a sign of the failure of narrative to sustain its “plot” or ‘ideology’. For whilst narrative affects a violent re-alignment and re-shaping of bodily experience, this



operation always leaves its mark, a telling reminder of its inherently damaging imposition. The violated or disfunctioning body can be seen as the figure which disrupts narrational authority and enables a reading which is attentive to that experience which the narrative has tried to suppress or exclude. Ledbetter's disclosing damaged body then, like Stacey's living non-surviving body, is a figure which resists narrativisation; a figure in which time is no longer experienced as progressive or accumulative; such a body is one in which death is held as an immanence. Thus Stacey's identification of the potential of writing to impose and restore a sense of linearity to a traumatised body extends beyond its application to the epistemology of autobiographical and critical writing in relation to health care cultures. This understanding enables an analysis of narrative writing *both in and on* performance which is sensitive to its always operative re-alignments of the death shadowed body. Further Ledbetter's notion that narrative writing operates to suppress specific subjectivities which return to haunt the text through the figure of the violated body acting as a sign of that text's epistemological failure, opens possibilities around reading the appearance of the body in *extremis*, as a sign of mortal dis-ease within narrative, as it appears in that most embodied of forms, performance. Such understandings enable my own analysis to move beyond a consideration of aesthetics focused on liminal spatial and temporal plays towards performance works which utilize textual expression and, like Stacey and Ledbetter's criticism, are concerned to explore the operations of writing and narration on a body marked by death's immanence. The bound and tortured bodies of Forced Entertainment's *Club of No Regrets* which arise in the failure of the staging of narrative fragments immediately spring to mind. However it would be mistaken to assume that, in a performance, narrative writing is the sole form through which the experience of



linear continuation is imposed on a body touched by death's immanence. As Phelan argues in her discussion of neglected somatic practices in the early treatment of hysteria, the restoration of a sense of progressive time to a traumatised body is fundamentally achievable through the experience of a condition of *generative movement*.<sup>46</sup> Whilst Phelan's analysis is turned towards this generative movement within the psychic relationship between bodies (in particular the bodies of the analyst / father and the patient / daughter), her argument opens questions around the potentially regenerative relations between "the body and time, and the body and language" which have an important bearing on the question of performance as an encounter with the alterity of death.<sup>47</sup>

### ***Rigorous Bodies***

Significantly Phelan's analysis of the psycho-somatic dynamics of hysteria, enables an understanding of the way in which it is not only narrative in performance that promises linearity to the body, but *the succession of action itself*. Through her recovery of the physicality of the early exchanges between patient and analyst, Phelan suggests that choreography, like psychoanalysis, is a form of conscious mastery of the human body. Without this imposition the body does not experience itself through chronological succession; freed from conscious thought, the body is disjoined from time. In the stillness of the hospital bed, my own consciousness struggles to master an ailing and unruly body in which time slips, stalls, condenses and extends. Dance can be seen as a conscious attempt to give time back to the body; to create and impose on the body the temporal and spatial cohesion of narrative through the establishment of flow. This linear and restorative

animation of the body is linked in Phelan's analysis to a curative process in which the psyche learns to overcome the resonance of traumas which leave the body in states of paralysis. In particular bodily stillness is linked, through the history of the psychoanalytical treatment of hysteria, to a self-damaging and fixed encounter with death. The hysteric's body paralyses in a simultaneous remembrance and anticipation of death. She is caught in time, torn between regressing and progressing, trapped by traumatic recurrence which has stilled time's process.<sup>48</sup> Her body has become unfixed from the conscious control which gave it narrativity. Phelan suggests that it is the generative movement of a physical re-staging of the trauma that enables the subject to seal out the resonance of the past through the present, to prevent the recurrence of a trauma by storing death in an always anterior position. Phelan thus argues that choreography shares with psychoanalysis - both through its forgotten physicalised, and its established locutionary transference - an ability to suture the psychic to the physical, restoring freedom of movement to a frozen, time-locked body.

Whilst Phelan's analysis here is not pushed through into a sustained examination of performance aesthetics, it opens the potential of reading the choreographed body in performance as it relates to, and operates on, traumatic experience. If, as Phelan suggests, it is animacy which offers, in its coincidence of the body with temporal flow, the possibility of a distance from death, of protection from traumatic resonance, then how might performance, which would seem to be necessarily predicated on physical movement, affect embodied dynamics which are open to the alterity of death? Just as Ledbetter looked within fictional narratives for the presence of the violated body which signals the



disciplinary abuse of narrative itself, it is possible to look within the temporal linearities of performance for similarly disclosing instances of temporal disruption or collapse. Within the actually embodied form of performance, such instances are marked by the presence of a restricted body, a body in *extremis*. In some instances this body acts to problematise performance's potential closure around the alterity of death by its own resistance of submission to temporal progress. Whilst Taylor Woodrow's severed heads may seem to be exemplary in this respect, the aesthetic ploy of the isolated body part is somewhat blunt as a response to the challenge of progressive animacy that the full performing body presents to the artist.

In this context the two most recent works of the Chicago based company Goat Island can be seen as enacting the play between resistance and acceptance of the disciplinary operations of actional and narrational linear time on the body. Both *It's Shifting, Hank* and *How Dear to Me the Hour When Daylight Dies* might be read as embodied re-stagings of the traumatic analagous in this sense to the lost somatic practice of psychoanalysis.<sup>49</sup> However the company's re-enactment of these 'originary' events is not organised around a therapeutic goal. The re-staged event cannot be seen as one which enables a conscious accommodation and resolution of the wounding event, but rather, as one which re-opens and sets in play its resonance. In order to make *It's Shifting, Hank* the company began by invoking a set of painful memories. Their abstracted originating question, "Why were you in pain in such a beautiful place?" turns the process towards an examination of the past through the memory of a wounding which is resistant to healing. The 'answer' which initiates the creation of the performance work, must by definition be a



past held in the present, a re-told pain captured in the time of its hurting; it must adhere to a context in which it is unaccommodated and incongruous and consequently must be unresolved by the re-telling. The 'answer' then must be a re-staging of an open wound, a trauma whose causality is requested (in the 'why'), but nonetheless signaled as unrecoverable through the open generality of the request. Even in this 'innocent beginning' the company inaugurate process structures designed to unleash the resonance of the traumatic through performance as wounding re-enactment.

The real answers which the performers supply to the process - specific memories of traumatic events - are used to generate repetitious movement sequences which act to some extent as distorted and distanced re-stagings of the originary events. Charged fragments from these recollections are taken out of context, isolated and re-worked in terms of their present power as extracted elements within a new context. Other accumulated movement sequences which are not drawn from overtly traumatic sources are distorted until they "seemed to suggest human activity under extreme stress, dictated by specific but hidden rules, with no apparent objective other than survival".<sup>50</sup> Here mundane movement is re-shaped by traumatic urgency and an evasive necessity. The memory fragments, which may be re-animated through gestural, spatial or textual forms, consequently appear within the performance work as being marked by a difficult referentiality. Each gesture or sentence or configuration appears to carry a dense history, but one which is nevertheless elusive in its present meaning. Performance, here, is figured not as an originary event but as a *re-enactment*. The event(s) which performance recalls is formed as meaningfulness whose meaning is absent, an inaccessible presence. Whilst the work is obviously consciously



ordered and rendered, the performance of the re-worked fragments seems at once to be both willed and involuntary, controllable and of excessive resonance. If the re-contextualisation of these trauma fragments seems to offer a curative movement through the act of re-telling / re-working / re-staging, through the ability of the present to re-order the past, then the form through which the re-contextualisation takes place, constantly agitates against such a possibility.

In the published document of *It's Shifting, Hank* the company describe a key moment in the process which gives them a major device through which to shape the performance structure:

Breathing / not breathing gave us a simple way to approach endurance. One person controlling another's breathing resembled, depending on the circumstances, a children's game, a medical procedure, or a torture technique. As we continued to work, we discovered breathing / not breathing had become the tonic of the piece's composition. It was the fixed point from which all concepts in the piece grew, leading out to dissonant areas and returning again to breathing / not breathing.<sup>51</sup>

The reader will not fail to notice the language through which this realisation is expressed.

The descriptive narrative about the creative process re-aligns the performance of the liminal body - the body between breath / life and not breath / death - by making it a 'solution'. This wavering body becomes a "tonic" for the troubling process of performance composition; a curative element which enables the ailing creative performance process (a story whose value, progress, consistency and closure is always in question) to reach a healthy completion. This is, of course, an example of 'scarring' within the narrative of the performance-document. The narrative operation of this description seems to suggest that there is one element within the work which is



restorative, a solution to its chronic puzzle. And yet this solution, this ‘grounding notion’, is marked in the document as polysemic but is then described as a “fixed point” to which the work obsessively returns, a return which I would suggest happens not because of breathing / not breathing’s ‘fixity’, its explanatory reassurance, but precisely because of its *restless elusiveness*.

The act of breathing / not breathing which opens, pervades and ‘closes’ *It’s Shifting, Hank* introduces the body of the performer as a site within the metaphors of the work. In this piece’s suddenly present and self-conscious beginning the spectator becomes rapidly attuned to the physical attention and self-attention that will pervade the rest of the performance. Goat Island’s work frequently places its audience in close proximity to its action, often in exposed positions. In both *It’s Shifting, Hank* and *How Dear to Me the Hour When Daylight Dies* the audience sit principally in a well lit traverse. Here, there is not only a consciousness for the spectator of their own image as part of the stage composition, but more importantly a powerful self-consciousness around the spectator’s own physicality, and in particular their breathing, prompted by a relation to the breathing of the performers. This awareness oscillates through the spectator’s reading of the piece, heightening at moments in which the exhaustion of the performers or their deliberate focus on breath becomes palpable. In their later piece, *How Dear to Me the Hour When Daylight Dies* this staged breath becomes an ambient soundtrack against which the action is played. The act of breathing / not breathing which the company note gives them “a way to approach endurance” in fact acts as a disruptive factor preventing the kind of secreted narrative force which Toepfer has associated with intense endurance



performance. The potential narrative thrust of endurance action is dispersed through the constant return to the dense non-progressive power of the breathing / not breathing act. This breathing / not breathing awakens a physical awareness which underpins all subsequent action, which seems to place the action itself as resting on a threshold from which it cannot escape.

In breathing / not breathing the company find a performance which, in its elaborate simplicity, seems to articulate the unstable complexity of the relation between the staging and its own history, between the controlled event and its uncheckable compulsion. In the act of breathing / not breathing the generative force of life and the destructive force of death are inseparably intertwined. Inhalation and exhalation, whose symmetry of action is only separated in birth or in death, are temporarily held apart and manipulated. Breath is pushed from its role as the invisible mechanism of the act into a primary function within the aesthetic. Breathing / not breathing becomes an organising metaphor for the liminality of a performance which is caught between death and life, history and the present, the originary event and its re-staging, the traumatic and the productive. Breath is itself the past in the present. It is each body's initial act (it precedes screaming) which becomes the body's calendar, punctuating its every moment with a repeated mark. Breath is the body's history and yet it is the body's present, the guarantor of life, the mechanism through which time can continue for the subject. In the grip of an amplified breath the body is placed at the source and the threshold of its existence. *Breath is the inaugural and the ultimate repetition.* As such, breath is also the physical event in which the dilemma of will becomes apparent. As both involuntary and controllable, the performance of breath stages the



relation between the unconscious and the conscious, simultaneously enacting the body's mastery by thought and its evasion.

In these ways *It's Shifting, Hank* can be seen as a work which *conceives performance as repetition*. Here performance is the psycho-somatic re-staging of events which evade explanation and conscious mastery. These events, which frequently contain experiences of emotional, physical and mental pain, are the subject's sudden encounters with the destructive force of death. As such these experiences exceed the subject and, as I have already suggested, cannot then be fully witnessed by it.<sup>52</sup> The collapse of the subject's understanding which, as Laub and Caruth have argued, can be seen as constituting such experiences, whilst protecting the subject, sets in motion a series of traumatic returns. These haunting recurrences of the event within the psyche are identified in psychoanalysis as occurring against the will of the subject. It is at this point that the analogy between performance and trauma may seem to have collapsed. The re-stagings which I have addressed cannot be seen as wholly uncontained eruptions of the traumatic; performance in this specific cultural context is of course a willed and highly complex articulation of conscious thought. Yet, within this mastery, it is the act of performance which destroys containment *from the inside*, disassembling thought's protective power, opening both the performing and the spectating subject to death's alterity. Here performance can be seen as traumatic recurrence, as repetition, because its aesthetics re-open the wound of death in consciousness and agitate against its closure. The traumatic is doubled through a form which resists its containment by understanding since the performance in which the traumatic reappears is itself an event in excess of the performing and spectating subjects.



Performance in this context is that which, though consciously and willfully initiated, pushes the spectating subject towards that traumatic experience which has evaded its understanding. Performance here, is not a symptom of psychic trauma, but a means through which an ethically driven address to psychic limits may be made.

Whilst I have put forward a reading of *It's Shifting, Hank* as a dilatory re-staging of the traumatic through reference to its treatment of sources and its disruption of temporal progress through its structure of repetition, the wounding which this piece enacts is particularly evident through its use of repetition in relationship to the performer's body. In this work, the spectator is prevented from organising the work into a set of coherent meanings or fictional unities that might come to a stable explanation of the work's traumatic source through its actional or fictional resonances. Within this problematisation of the representational coherence of the work the subjection of the body to orders of repetition is a key factor. Here repetition is the means through which the performing body is marked as a body resistant to temporal progress through both the flow of action and fictional narrativisation. In this work, action moves without evident causality, leaving the spectator to discern and produce the meanings of the relations of gestures. Gesture fragments do not resolve into purposeful sequences. The gestural expressions which the performers stage are employed as evident echoes of holdings of the body within previous events. The ordering of these fragments does not enable their cohesion within a replete action sequence, as other shards of gestural memories intrude upon action sequences which begin to stage discernible scenes. In *It's Shifting, Hank* the performers' bodies are caught in repetitious cycles of gestural expression which neither accumulate into a



sustained choreographic flow or 'fit' the narrative fragments which the company invoke in spoken texts. The piece pits its fractured textual sources against the performers activities, so that the fictional scenarios invoked in particular aspects of the texts do not correspond in any literal sense to the staged action. There is no use of the body in order to simply enact or illustrate the textual resonance. The body does not succumb to the orders of linear time inherent within fictional scenarios and narrative organisation. Neither the spoken texts nor the performers' bodies will function in ways which might support a fictional world to organise the work's meanings into a coherent whole.

In fact, in this highly physicalised work, the performer's body carries both the weight of representational responsibility (it appears to form the key to the performance's meaning and reason) and the disruptive force which problematises the representational coherence of the work. The bodies of Goat Island's performers, caught in repetitious cycles, pressed to extremity in action, never fully recover or surpass the absent originary event which their physical stagings repeat. In this respect the performer's bodies become simultaneously the key expressive element within the work, which seems to promise its delivery and solution, and also the means through which that solution is marked as inaccessible. The body is both the site and signal of traumatic experience and the medium which fails to convey its full force. As a work which re-stages and opens traumatic sources, *It's Shifting, Hank* refuses to form coherent representations of those traumas, in order that their power and sense remain open. As a spectator I am left with physical fragments whose force disrupts the explanatory thoughts I seek to impose upon them. In the grip of this highly physical and sensual encounter my ability to close-off traumatic resonance is perturbed. Here, my



initial analysis begins to touch on questions around the relationship between the embodied dynamics of performance and its representational structures, and the function of the realms of experience and understanding within spectatorship. In the coming chapter I will discuss these issues at greater length and their relationship to the constitution, performance and dislocation of identity.

In this chapter I have sought to extend an analogy between trauma and performance. Whilst the performances which I have discussed have overtly addressed traumatic experience, this analogy is one which has wider implications for the relationship between the spectating subject and the performance work. Performance, here, is figured as that which enables difficult insight and simultaneously that which eludes and scars the spectating subject. Herein lies performance's most engaging paradox. For whilst performance seems, in its immediacy, to be the most present of forms, it is in this very immediacy that it, like the traumatic event, exceeds its participants and its spectators. In the excess of the event the participant-spectator is left both absent and blind. The understanding of the truth of the event of performance then, must always be belated and re-moved. Performance condemns its spectators to revenance, since they must be *elsewhere* and see *otherwise* in order to know its truth. This unbridgeable void within the knowledge of performance perhaps begins to explain the attraction and dilemma of performance writing. In this belatedness I can only begin to discern the object of my writing, which is, at once, absolutely driven and ever failing. For at the 'heart' of performance is a deferral of its truth, a truth which would be death.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant, Sage, 1993: 158-9.

<sup>2</sup> The installation was presented at the National Review of Live Art, Third Eye Centre, Glasgow, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Baudrillard: 158.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*: 127.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*: 159.

<sup>6</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, Polity, 1992. Similarly the collections *Death and Representation*, eds. Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen, Johns Hopkins, 1993 and *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth, Johns Hopkins, 1995 contain multiple examples of works which bring together psychoanalytical understandings and sociological theory.

<sup>7</sup> Bauman: 152.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*: 31.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*: 24.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance Jane Littlewood, 'The Denial of Death and Rites of Passage in Contemporary Societies', *The Sociology of Death*, ed. David Clark, Blackwell, 1993: 69-84.

<sup>11</sup> Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, UCP, 1960: 147.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Kastenbaum, 'Safe Death in the Postmodern World', *A Safer Death*, eds. A. Gilmore and S. Gilmore, New York, 1988: 3-13.

<sup>13</sup> I will later explore the impossibility of this consignment of death to the past through a discussion of its traumatic recurrence and resonance for performance. See pages 107-129.

<sup>14</sup> Baudrillard: 130.



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<sup>15</sup> Andrew Benjamin, 'Matter and Meaning: On Installations', *Installation Art*, ed. Andrew Benjamin, Art and Design, 1993: 31-33.

<sup>16</sup> The significance of this association of the installation with the scene of the unconscious will become apparent in the subsequent section of this chapter. See pages 107-129.

<sup>17</sup> The confusion of the real with the imagined which the installation initiates is later discussed in relationship to the uncanny. See pages 107-112.

<sup>18</sup> This aesthetic ploy can be seen in numerous video installations as well as other automated forms of installation creating sound environments or using mobile sculptures. See for instance Mona Hatoum's piece *Light Sentence*, Serpentine Gallery, 1993, documented in *Installation Art*, Ed. Andrew Benjamin, Art and Design, 1993.

<sup>19</sup> I will later describe this failure of witnessing as a constituting element within the performance event. See pages 112-129.

<sup>20</sup> The previously mentioned work Hatoum is a strong example of this assurance. In *Light Sentence* I find the reassurance of this continuation cuts against the power of terror within the work. Whilst the creation of an autonomous place for *Light Sentence* lends institutional resonance it also signals a lack of specific attention for the spectating subject.

<sup>21</sup> Karl Toepfer, 'Strategies of Temporal-Spatial Appropriation in Postmodern Aesthetic Performance: Part I', *Theater Three*, Spring, 1989: 68-86.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*: 70.

<sup>23</sup> See pages 114-129.

<sup>24</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' (1919), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. James Strachey, vol. XVII, Hogarth Press, 1955.

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<sup>25</sup> My argument here crudely updates Freud's notion, following Jacques Lacan and many others, in assuming that reality cannot possibly be perceived outside of, and is always already enmeshed within, the linguistic.

<sup>26</sup> Freud: 355.

<sup>27</sup> I am grateful to Andrew Quick for pointing out that the nursery resonances apparent here might also lead to a different reading of the installation, not based around disappearance but appearance; the emergence of the face from the pillow invoking birth rather than death. Recognising this possible reading points to the gendered basis upon which my own reading rests.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*: 359.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*: 357, 360.

<sup>30</sup> Elisabeth Bronfen, 'Risky Resemblances: On Repetition, Mourning, and Representation', *Death and Representation*, eds. Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen, Johns Hopkins, 1993: 103.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*: 104.

<sup>32</sup> Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, 'The Paradoxical Status of Repetition', *Poetics Today*, 1, 1980: 151-59.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*: 155. The relationship between narrative and repetition is explored further. See pages 119-129.

<sup>34</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), SE, vol. XVIII: 7-64.

<sup>35</sup> Such an insistence is a motif in Taylor Woodrow's work. In an earlier piece *Living Paintings*, which utilised a similar combination of the animate (performer) inside the inanimate (two dimensional painting), spectators were occasionally literally held by the painting.

<sup>36</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' (1919), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. James Strachey, vol. XVII, Hogarth Press, 1955: 359.



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<sup>37</sup> Cathy Caruth, 'Trauma and Experience: Introduction', *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth, Johns Hopkins, 1995: 7.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*: 7.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*: 8.

<sup>40</sup> Jackie Stacey, *Teratologies: A Cultural Study of Cancer*, Routledge, 1997: 241-245.

<sup>41</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit, Stanford 1993: 4.

<sup>42</sup> Mark Ledbetter, *Victims and the Postmodern Narrative or Doing Violence to the Body*, MacMillan 1996.

<sup>43</sup> Here Ledbetter's analysis coincides with that current within Queer theory which seeks to recover the marginal subject through readings of the trope of the spectral. See for instance Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*, CUP, 1993.

<sup>44</sup> Ledbetter: 10. Whilst the definition and use of the term 'ethic' remains somewhat unelaborated in Ledbetter's writing, it seems to be broadly applied as a political acceptance of different identities. Here, I am obviously less concerned with the discrepancy between Ledbetter's use of the term and my own (as an experiencing of the epistemological limit of a text in the event of its reading / performance) and more concerned with the emphasis on the violated body, which Ledbetter associates with such an event of reading.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*: 18. Here Ledbetter follows Elaine Scarry in his understanding that fictionality is imbued with body metaphor. As a projection of the human body fiction is seen as an embodied text, hence the phrase 'narrative scars'. Disruptions within narrative harmony are consequently seen as wounds within the body-text. Coherence in narrative is allied with bodily coherence: the healthy body. Ledbetter perceives the wounds within a narrative as the facilitators of an ethical experience of learning for the reader.

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<sup>46</sup> Peggy Phelan, 'Dance and the history of hysteria', *Corporealities: Dance Knowledge, Culture and Power*, ed. Susan Leigh Foster, Routledge 1996: 90-104.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*: 90.

<sup>48</sup> I am of course referring to the infamous case of Anna O. as it is told by Josef Breuer and re-told in turn by Freud, Lacan and Phelan.

<sup>49</sup> *It's Shifting, Hank* was performed at Arnolfini, February 1994. *How Dear to Me the Hour When Daylight Dies* was performed at Arnolfini, June 1996.

<sup>50</sup> Goat Island, *Goat Island Handbook: Process and Performance of It's Shifting, Hank*, Chicago 1994: 12. Here it is also worth noting that the company's process of performance creation is one which trusts the chance encounter, the seemingly irrelevant interest, as a means of structuring and determining the progress of the work. Karen Christopher notes that the work "depends on" the "great coincidence" (*Ibid.*: 26). As such the company deliberately open the process to unconscious association, and particularly that material whose resonance is legitimated by a collective company unconscious. The repeated and uncanny occurrence of the subjects of pain and death, seem unsurprising in such a context.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*: 15.

<sup>52</sup> See page 112-114.



#### 4. **Performing Absent Bodies: Between Experience and Representation**

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration.<sup>1</sup>

Insofar as it is seen as a medium, a carrier or bearer of information that comes from elsewhere (either “deep” in the subject’s incorporeal interior or from the “exterior” world), the specificity and concreteness of the body must be neutralized, tamed, made to serve other purposes. [...] Its constitutive role in forming thoughts, feelings, emotions, and psychic representations must be ignored, as must its role as threshold between the social and the natural.<sup>2</sup>

In the works I have so far discussed I have suggested that performance constitutes a way of knowing: a means of accessing the spectating and acting subject’s as yet unthought thoughts. This notion has been explored by analysing the role of performance in terms of a general ethical engagement with alterity and more specifically as a means of encountering the alterity of death. Summarised in such simple terms it might seem that performance is a form whose resonance is limited to the realms of epistemology; that the question of the attainment of knowledge and understanding through performance might be separable from questions around the incarnate and experiential dynamics of performance events. This would indeed appear as a severe limitation of the meanings of ‘engagement’ and ‘encounter’, seeming to suggest that what is known through performance is somehow immaterially given and received rather than being physically enacted and undeniably felt. In fact, such a diminished approach would fall into that body-negating tendency which Elizabeth Grosz has so comprehensively identified and dissected as a founding episteme in

the history of “mainstream Western philosophical thought” as well as some aspects of contemporary feminist and poststructuralist theory.<sup>3</sup>

In *Volatile Bodies* Grosz traces and argues against a history of dualist thinking on subjectivity which sees mind and body (its correlate activities; thought and sensation, and sciences; psychology and biology) as inherently distinct and countering entities. This binarism, Grosz argues, has sustained one term above the other within the history of debates on the ontology and epistemology of subjectivity, privileging mind as the principal constitutive element and body as a subordinate, dependent and often omitted part. In effect, body has taken on the status of the Other of the subject to the extent that its consciousness is predominantly defined through mind, reason, and psychology. Here, body is seen as the given and natural element of the subject with little to offer towards self-constitution or world-constitution; a task which thought must manage through a conscious mastery of its crude but pliable matter, an essential and universal biological form. Grosz wishes to refute such notions as “nonhistorical, naturalistic and organicist” as they fail to account for the historical, cultural and material differentiation of bodies and most importantly the agency of bodies within subjects. In this context understandings of *how knowledge is constituted in the subject* have tended towards the purely cognitive, unsullied by complex materialities, thus excluding the formative interactions of physical sensations between the knowing subject and its objects.

Yet when performance encounters have been directly addressed in my discussion, they have appeared not as objects separable from the sensory perspective of their perceiving



subject, but as events whose ‘recovery’ has implicitly required an experiential, embodied and subjective account. Here, the writing subject is not a transparency, but an active material presence meshed into the multiple affective relations (sensory, emotional, memorial, conceptual) of the event. Consequently performance has not been figured as a discrete object of study, nor has it been confined to some purely specular, textual or epistemic framework of analysis. Instead, my analyses, while concerned with the specular, textual and epistemic dynamics of performance, have employed an understanding of its encounter which might partly be termed, distorting Artaud, as “a transfer of forces / from body to body”; an encounter which cannot be thought of outside of the experience of its inherently incarnate interaction.<sup>4</sup> This particular attitude towards performance is traditionally that of the phenomenologist, and whilst my own perspective on ‘the phenomenological body’, as a human form and as a critical discipline, is one of ambivalence, I will argue that the insights of this body convey a powerful and productive challenge to definitions of the knowing subject and to an epistemology both in and of performance.

What a selective appropriation of phenomenological perspectives offers, beyond a more subjective and necessarily personal mode of address, is an approach to the writing of performance events, and hence to an epistemology in / of the event, which is concerned with the terms and modalities of its livedness.<sup>5</sup> The personalisation of critical discourse in this context is not an accidental, opportunistic or excessive addition; it reflects the refusal of the distinction between public and private, objective and subjective modes of discourse which are themselves correlates of the mind-body split. This subjectively marked



approach needs to be distinguished from performance theories (falling into the tradition Grosz identifies) which through their objectification, disregard or omit the experiential and corporeal content of the event. From the outset it is worth noting that I do not believe that this critical stress on the in-corporated aspects of events necessarily leads to their essentialisation.<sup>6</sup> As Jane Gallop has stressed, writings which seek to revalue the corporeal within discourse maintain a complex relation to the essentialism of which they are frequently accused.<sup>7</sup> A serious address to the constitutive role of the somatic within the knowing subject necessarily re-opens the boundaries of the 'natural' biological body. The critical rush to dichotomise between essential and non-essential positions often harbours a "suspicion that any sustained attention to the body must fall outside the bounds of serious thought", and can itself be seen as a supplemental logic of the mind-body split, closing prematurely on the experiential field and reflecting a traditional devaluation of the somatic.<sup>8</sup> A selective appropriation of phenomenological approaches need not assume that it 'returns' to some nature of / within the performer-spectator corporeal relation, or that this return discloses some form of universal subjectivity, or that there is only one such relation without differentiation, or that this relation is ever fully recovered through its reinscription in discourse. It will shortly become apparent that this attitude is one that runs against some of the early assumptions of key phenomenological writers.<sup>9</sup> Rather, in specific instances, my argument seeks to uncover the sensory aspects of the performer-spectator relation (amongst other aspects) and to analyse their indelible and constitutive (but non-foundational) role in the witnessing of events. Nor should it be assumed that such a critical perspective discredits or disallows other approaches which do not display or analyse that they constitute themselves within the experiential field of the event. Rather, it



demands that such approaches should be read from a perspective which is vigilant towards their differences and denials of sensation; the inevitable distance and de-corporealisation upon which unwittingly or determinedly objectifying critiques rest.

Whilst phenomenal understandings have been implicitly operated within my discussion in the previous two chapters, they have, up to this point, been sustained as a conceptual background awaiting an explicit theorisation. The coming discussions will work through some of the previous latencies within my discourse and intensively question their suppositions against one particular performance work: Forced Entertainment's *12am: Awake & Looking Down*.<sup>10</sup> This will involve questions which have traditionally been asked by theatre phenomenologists. What are the functions and effects of bodies within the experiences of performance events? What is the sensory relationship between spectating bodies and acting bodies? Alongside these established dilemmas I will seek to pose questions which will move away from the traditional grounds of phenomenology. How does the somatic content of witnessing constitute and define what is understood through performance? Can a phenomenology of performance be allied with its epistemology? If the body is normatively taken as the Other of mind in much contemporary criticism and philosophy, to what extent is this dualism and its adjoining somatic devaluation challenged or supported through performance? What is the relation between bodies as experiential fields and bodies as representational spaces?

In the previous chapter I argued that in Goat Island's pieces *It's Shifting*, *Hank* and *How Dear to Me the Hour When Daylight Dies* a certain deployment of the body in



performance was responsible for a resistance to the orders of narrativity. An analogy was drawn between the narrative which psychoanalysis offers to an hysterical subject, and the narrative which the progress of fictional and actional time offers to the performing and spectating subject. In both cases it was suggested that a particular form of physical re-enactment of the traumatic, and within this re-staging a bodily correspondence (purged in the oral tradition that became the history of psychoanalytical practice and suppressed in the economies of the narrativisation of performance), is responsible for a disturbance in the closure of knowledges around the traumatic. Anna O.'s premature and self-damaging reckonings of her father's death are opened and reformed through Breuer's radically physical approach.<sup>11</sup> It is specifically through this embodied exchange that her trauma is re-moved. My own near / potential death recurs to me in the disruptions of temporal, actional and fictional progress in the work of Taylor Woodrow and Goat Island. The inherent bodily correspondence (face to face, breath to breath) is one which re-opens protective knowledges to an experience; an experience which I have already identified as an ethical encounter with alterity. This understanding of performance as an experiential exchange suggests that the ethical encounter which I have described is intrinsically enabled through embodiment and that it cannot be reduced to a purely specular, textual or epistemic framework. The bodies involved in this correspondence are not bodies that are mastered by their respective psyche's but are bodies which perform a relation that exceeds mental control. The exchange which I have described is not one in which the body plays a secondary or supplementary role to a cognitive process, but one in which somatic content both disrupts and re-constitutes the knowledge of the subject. In this particular context the model of subjectivity founded on a psyche involved in a continuous battle to control an



errant body can be seen as another inflection of the mind-body schism, revealing this dichotomy's wider role in the subject's defense against death in which mind is cast as the 'transcendent' form and body its finite, vulnerable and inevitably mortal weight.

This understanding of the relationship between the body and the psyche clearly moves away from a more common understanding in which the body functions as a reflective and symptomatic text of a self, centered on the psyche, which through its surface representations signals itself as a depth beneath appearances. In this model of the subject somatic signs are not given or read as human identity itself, but as expressions of and clues to a non-apparent interior identity. Identity is thus formulated as an elusive interiority accessible through its informative exterior trappings. In relation to the definition of the self the realm of the experiential and of bodily sensation is demoted to a reflective secondarity, a revealing but nonetheless inoperative materiality. Grosz counts this version of the somatic as part of a wider "willful subjectivity" apparent across a number of authors writing within discrete disciplines and political perspectives.<sup>12</sup> The coming analysis is concerned to elaborate the activities, disorders and resistances of the body, in order to wrestle it away from understandings of the knowing subject which devalue the significance of somatic affectivity.

### ***The Inscribed Surface of Events***

The notion of the body as an expressive medium marked by an interiority which acts upon it, actually shares a certain conception of the somatic with theories that are concerned to

elaborate the ways in which exterior forces inscribe, condition and construct the body. In *Mythologies*, for instance, Barthes depicts the body as a form wrapped in the linguistic structures of myth, a culturally encoded medium, encased in value-laden markings which make claims towards 'naturalness'.<sup>13</sup> Decoding this body is then perceived as a critical act inaugurating the succession of 'the natural' by a mythological *mise-en-abyme*. For Barthes, this critical act enables an understanding of the latent (bourgeois) values which the codes embody and their exposure as cultural, historical and political contingencies. In this conception, the body is a vehicle for something else, it is always appropriated by ideologies masking themselves in myth. As the bearer of a signifying process, the body becomes a readable text, and as such, a site within which interpretation may elicit understandings about the Self or the culture it reflects. However these conceptions of the somatic, like the body-as-psychical-symptom, do not systematically account for the contributory role *of* the body *to* the Self or the body's active role as an affective entity in the production of culture. Here corporeal and material modalities are subordinated to the intelligibility of the body-as-sign.

The two quite distinct registers of the divided sections of *Mythologies*, perhaps suggests that the "general science" of mythological structure which Barthes presents is in need of a different form of articulation, found in this work's personal voice and fragmentary approaches, whose supplementary difference is that they *enact* what has elsewhere been constituted through analysis. The presence of this enactment and its highly subjective style, perhaps predictively, reflects Barthes' need to approach what his theorisation omits: the affective body. However, whilst Barthes takes a certain pleasure in his vignettes, the



fragments which refer to human subjects remain dedicated to a study of the mythological body as *the object* of a restlessly deciphering and de-naturalising address. *Mythologies* does not really begin to enact or theorize the embodied, experiential, and sensual content of the spectating / consuming / dissecting or analysing subject. The revaluation of this aspect of the knowing subject does become a significant project of an erotics of reading in his later work *The Pleasure of the Text*. Here Barthes' intention is to move beyond the individualist notions of pleasure on 'the right' and the trivialising of pleasure on 'the left' and ultimately beyond the repression and limitation of pleasure within discourse in general. Barthes identifies these positions as falsely perpetuating a mind-body schism which sets "heart against head, sensation against reasoning, (warm) 'life' against (cold) 'abstraction'".<sup>14</sup> The pleasure which Barthes seeks, he argues, cannot be reduced to the simply dichotomised realms of understanding or sensation.<sup>15</sup> Refuting the separation of the signifier from its inhabitation, of meaning from sensation, of cognition from experience Barthes insists, "What is significance? It is meaning, *insofar as it is sensually produced*."<sup>16</sup>

In order to lay out an erotics of reading Barthes, elaborates numerous qualities of the subject, object and their relations, within which a sensual understanding may take place. Barthes establishes a classification of two forms of reading, *plaisir* and *jouissance*, both of which can be seen as participating in a relation of eroticism. Whilst Barthes argues that pleasure and bliss are distinct experiences, available in specific texts of specific traditions, with particular cultural and political resonances, his use of this categorisation is slippery in the extreme. For the purposes of this discussion, the categorical power of the distinction in relation to cultural and textual objects must fall away, but the attempt to identify

particular aspects of the reading relation in terms which elaborate and revalue its lived corporeal content are most significant here. Though these critical forays are typically dense and fragmented they do indicate significant conceptual factors which move towards a fuller account of somatic affectivity as it relates to reading and consequently to the operations of the knowing subject.

When Barthes turns to express the embodied, erotic relation between the reader and the text, revealingly he turns to a theatrical metaphor:

On the stage of the text, no footlights: there is not, behind the text, someone active (the writer) and out front someone passive (the reader); there is not a subject and an object.<sup>17</sup>

The text is like a stage without a clear division between itself and its audience; an erotic relation cannot be constituted in the separation of the subject and the object, or in the working of an active object on a passive subject, but for Barthes, must arise in the loss of these distinctions in a *mutual activity*. Barthes also argues that the condition of pleasure in reading is related to a subjectivity of disjunction where the subject experiences through a text both “the consistency of his selfhood and its collapse, its fall” or in a state of bliss the subject is engaged in a relation which is constituted through a complete loss of a sense of self.<sup>18</sup>

In this revaluation and expression of the somatic content of reading, pleasure and bliss are not only dependent on a rupturing or loss of the boundaries of the subject but an accompanying dissolution of the status of the object. Most importantly Barthes argues that pleasure and bliss are not dependent on the stability of the object, but its very loss.



Barthes' pleasurable texts are not objects at all, but works whose 'nature' is fragmented, dissonant, polysemic, uncertain; correspondingly the pleasures which he takes from these texts are friable and transient.<sup>19</sup> In particular the sensory relation of bliss which Barthes has with a text can neither be named by the subject (the text of bliss "brings to a crisis his relation with language") nor can it be represented in the text ("bliss is unspeakable, interdicted. [...] 'it cannot be spoken except between the lines ...'").<sup>20</sup> Barthes' exalted sensory experience is thus not obtainable from, or identifiable in, objects; it is what the object cannot contain, an excess beyond language and objecthood.

Whilst *The Pleasure of the Text* does lay down initial markers towards an understanding of embodied signification, particularly with regard to conditions of subjectivity and some aspects of the subject-object relation, as a "theory of the materialist subject" it is somewhat incomplete.<sup>21</sup> Whilst it does contend that an embodied relation must be recovered for criticism, that such a relation is dependent on a dissolution of the boundaries of subject and object, and that in its occurrence this relation is "individual", site-specific, active and transient, it does not really identify a breadth of material conditions of somatic affectivity in relationship to reading encounters.<sup>22</sup> In this work Barthes' critical focus is always a textual object and the body arising within that object is consequently always a "figuration": a metaphorical body.<sup>23</sup> In addition the sensorium which Barthes elaborates is organised around the pleasurable, which perhaps too readily collapses the sensory into the sensual. Barthes invocation of pleasure and bliss, whilst re-positioning the circulation of meaning in reading within an embodied and lived context, does not elaborate the relationship of such pleasures to questions of sex, sexuality and sexual identity, without



which it is now difficult to imagine an incisive (and non-universal) account of the subject's pleasure being made. In later writings, particularly and not unsurprisingly in his 'autobiographical' work *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, he remains troubled by the question of the body, naming it his "mana-word"; a stubbornly persistent term which haunts his texts, seeming to offer some transcendent explanation of his work, yet remaining difficult and opaque precisely because of its evasion of his understanding.<sup>24</sup>

Whilst Barthes clearly recognised some of the exclusions of his "general science", a substantial and still growing collection of semiological analysis on theatre and performance, deriving (amongst other sources) from early Barthes, is committed to the notion of the body-as-sign and its location through often detailed categorisation within visual, kinesic, and aural signifying systems.<sup>25</sup> Elaine Aston and George Savona for instance, describe the actor's body as "a locus of multiple interconnecting sign-systems", presenting various taxonomies which attempt to name the form and operations of 'the acting body'.<sup>26</sup> Reflecting semiology's scientific fantasy of containment, the systematic and totalising scheme which Aston and Savona attempt to apply to performance seems in constant danger of collapse; the problematic sites which haunt their discourse are always 'recuperated' within an ever-receding horizon of signification. Just as Barthes was haunted by his "mana-word", within Aston and Savona's argument 'the acting body' proves an unruly and unmappable site. The body is identified as a privileged locus of theatrical signs and as such is given the status of a primary and always centered form, revealing a stubbornly soma-centric understanding of stage space. The distinction, relative complexity and manner of 'the acting body's' signifiatory classifications when compared



to other aspects of the structural *mise-en-scene* lend it a form somehow subject to an intensity of attention from the signifying system. The establishment of ‘the acting body’ as the ultimate nexus of a density of polysemic signs perhaps reveals the difficulty of containing this body within a semiological approach. The classifications expand horizontally within a signifying plane revealing ever new typologies without approaching that area of the subject which gives the system depth: the lived dimensions of the signification.

Aston and Savona repeat Tadeusz Kowzan’s categories of corporal signification which rigorously attempt to delineate those signs which lie outside of the actor’s body and those which fall within its grasp; an analysis which sees the acting body as a sealed object of signification.<sup>27</sup> Additionally whilst detailing the signifying means and history of the separation between audience and performer they, perhaps unwittingly, speak only within the binary of *the spectator’s* relation to *the acting body* and vice versa, a dichotomisation and classification whose legitimacy is never questioned.<sup>28</sup> The mutual activity which Barthes recognised as a part of the physical interaction of simple textual reading is not accommodated in this analysis; there is little acknowledgment that the actor also sees, that the spectator also acts. Human motility in its irrepressible corporeality might seem to offer a site of resistance to these simplifications, but despite their noting of Patrice Pavis’s significant, but perhaps incomplete warning that “Once gesture becomes the object of a descriptive discourse, it loses all specificity; reduced to the level of a text, it does not give any account of its *volume*, of its signifying *force* [...]” [my italics], Aston and Savona

persist with their separation between spectator and actor, their upholding of an absolute dichotomy between subject and object, and their de-corporealisation of both.<sup>29</sup>

When Aston and Savona turn to the ‘activity’ of the spectating subject within the signifying ‘*mise-en-scene*’ of the theatre event it is only through the limited terms of the spectator’s cognitive production. Whilst they do signal, following Keir Elam, that the semiological approach cannot account for the “passion” of the spectator, the huge consequences of this omission for the place of the experiential realm within the systems of signification are not followed through.<sup>30</sup> Here the semiological approach reveals a thorough refusal to examine the relation of the material and experiencing body as it relates to both spectator and actor. In this refusal, the complex inter-relation between subject and object, their reversals and diffusions within performance encounters, reflects a de-corporealised understanding of the knowing subject limited to a textual, specular or kinesic signifying economy. Passing over Barthes’ later understanding of the necessity of a revaluation of “the materialist subject”, and its correspondent implication of dissolved boundaries between subjects and objects, these specific approaches write the body as a discrete and classifiable object upon which signifying systems are mapped, and from which they may be incorporeally read. Such semiological perspectives neutralise and subordinate the somatic content of performance events in the intelligibility of signification.

Foucault goes further with the model of bodies as sites of exterior imposition, establishing the body as that which is marked and subjugated by discourses of power.<sup>31</sup> If, as Barthes similarly contends, the body can be seen as culturally and historically imprinted matter,



“the inscribed surface of events”, for Foucault this impression is one through which the subject is the object of a powerful disciplinary control instilling social values and norms. In this way, Foucault moves beyond an understanding of the operations of power through brute or evident limitations of freedom by the state or by individuals, to one which is concerned with ideational societal modes of suppression and restriction which “structure the possible field of action” of supposedly autonomous figures.<sup>32</sup> Power is thus located not simply within the actions of agents, but within social rationalities, discourses and knowledges which inform human practices. My discussion of the temporal, spatial and objectifying orders imposed in hospital exemplifies, in a Foucauldian manner, the means through which such immaterial forces structure social organisation and materialities. Cultural and Self knowledges play a distinctive role in the operations of power, defining the truth value of the objects to which they are applied. In ‘The Subject and Power’ Foucault identifies one aspect of the operation of power and its subjection of the individual as the “objectivizing of the subject”, where the individual is divided from others or from itself by the imposition of a social identity or name.<sup>33</sup> These delineations of individuals, such as the mad and the insane, the ill and the well, and their subsequent restriction of the subject’s realm of action, insure social functioning and serve the normalising purposes of the social structure.

For Foucault it is not simply that the freedoms of the individual are restricted by this imposition, nor is it merely a matter, as Rosalyn Diprose identifies, that the individual comes to believe in the values behind the imposition.<sup>34</sup> The “techniques of power” which Foucault identifies actively produce a normative, functioning social subject, and in

particular “they operate *on the body* to transform it, divide it, invest it with capacities and train it to perform certain functions”. [my italics]<sup>35</sup> The inscribing discourses of power insinuate themselves through the shaping of knowledges, informing and producing the knowing subject, determining and identifying the truth of its identity, actions, perceptions, understandings, pleasures and desires. The privileged site of this disciplinary inscription of the subject is the body, where power takes hold through involuntary and voluntary processes, through physical imposition and habituation. The bodies in which we live are produced, encultured and indelibly marked through these operations. In both voluntary and involuntary processes of subjection, the body of the subject is seen as an object and instrument of power. Once more, it is that material part of the subject which succumbs to inscription and is acted upon by an exterior force; its own positive constitutive role within the formation of the knowing subject and its activities are not extensively examined.

Foucault’s later concern, not with the means through which the subject is produced by discourses of power, but with the subject’s own role in self production, moves his critique away from an emphasis on the subject as the site of subjection towards notions of the subject as active and resistive.<sup>36</sup> Recognising the overly passive conception of the disciplined subject, this approach elaborates a space of agency for the subject, which revolves around notions of self-formation. As Judith Butler and Diprose have argued, this space of agency cannot be seen as somehow outside of the discourses and operations of power, but as a working within and against them.<sup>37</sup> The model of imposition or resistance is a somewhat absolute binary; not all practices of self-formation which utilise the body are necessarily divisible into such distinct terms. This model may not adequately account for



the ways in which cultural inscriptions are often desired and activated by the subject.

However Foucault's understanding of the subject's resistive agency is seen as requiring an *acting upon* the body, a transformation of its habituation through its conceptualisation as an aesthetic *medium*, and its use by the subject in differing and non-normative ways. In short, the move from subjection to resistance, does not lead to a systematic re-evaluation of corporeal affectivity in relation to the definition of the subject. The body remains that which is mobilised or used by something else, the object or instrument, this time of resistance, rather than a specific materiality with an active role in the constitution and experience of the knowing subject.

The difficulty with such understandings, and as Grosz has articulated, those theories which see the body as merely an instrument of the psyche, is that they construe bodies in overly passive terms.<sup>38</sup> Reduced to its role as an inoperative medium, through which other agencies whether interior or exterior are expressed, as the receptacle or conduit of a signifying system or as an "inscribed surface", the body is perceived as dull matter limited by a condition of receptivity in relation to its psychological, semiotic or discursive marking. In *Mythologies*, Barthes' body is reduced to a mutable text, but on what matter does this signification take place and what is the role of that matter in terms of the subject's definition and projection of culture and identity? Rigorously semiological readings of the body often operate through objectifying the body as a sign, excluding the very material affectivity within which the clear delineation of subject and object break down. Foucault's model, which sees the body as a raw material subject to discourses of power, argues that it is these discourses which actively produce the subject. Yet even here, the body's

constitutive role within this production is not acknowledged as active, it is merely seen as a passivity, as that which is imprinted, harnessed, and contained. Here, affective material bodies are seen as subordinate to their various over-writings, rather than being seen as constitutive of them. The inscribed body does not account for the interaction of specific materialities (sex, race, anatomy) with their cultural / historical / discursive formations. As such the models of the psychically symptomatic, culturally semiotised or historically inscribed body *assume a given materiality beneath inscription* that appears as a kind of blank page or passive object. If this given materiality is only *subject to* the forces of discourse, history and culture, then by definition it is ontologically *outside and before* them. In effect the representational body assumes a non/pre-discursive, a/pre-historical, a/pre-cultural body somehow awaiting psychical ordering, cultural and historical encoding or disciplinary power. As Grosz has argued, this assumed materiality beneath inscription is in effect an essential body: a timeless and undifferentiated materiality.<sup>39</sup> In its conception of the body as a passivity the representational body elides the complex materialities of bodies and their agency within the knowing subject's creation of itself and the world. The bodies which this conceptualisation excludes cannot be reduced to one body. They are not simply *the body* as it is inscribed, but *bodies* as they are lived.

### ***Beyond the Representational Body***

The various versions of the somatic, explored and delimited here, sharing an emphasis on the body as a representational medium, can thus be seen as being differently dependent on the logic and hierarchy of the mind-body schism. The representational body persistently



reduces the subject, formulating it in a way which positions the physical as supplemental and subordinate to mentality and its productions. The realm of the subject's experience is devalued in relationship to its knowledge which is cast in a distinct and higher order. In this division the sensory content and constitution of the act of knowing is elided. Recent phenomenological understandings of the subject, principally in dialogue with the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, can be used to reflect on, and extend beyond these limitations of the representational body.<sup>40</sup> Such theories, moving from an understanding of non-separation between mind and body, attempt to delineate the place, operations and influence of the sensory realm both within and between subjects. The developing discourses over the question of the body's affectivity, encapsulated in the phrase 'the lived body', are influential to this discussion since they begin from the premise that the sensory body is not a passive adjunct of the knowing subject. An examination of the body as it is lived works from the premise that the sensory realm does not form an additional part of the consciousness of the subject, a supplemental element with minor or excessive implications, but is inseparable from the subject's consciousness and constitutive of its operations. Thought and consciousness must then be analysed through their connection with the somatic since they are themselves necessarily and irrevocably embodied. The knowing subject must be considered in terms of its always already embodied dynamic, its material livedness.

Phenomenological understandings elaborating the dynamics of the lived body thus move away from that particular history of Western philosophical thought which has maintained a devaluation of the somatic. Resisting the reduction of the body to an object or passive

medium, the subject's corporeality is defined as the site "whereby our world comes into being".<sup>41</sup> The world which this perspective discloses is not the world as it is abstracted and objectified, but the world as it is encountered through the experiencing subject. Here the body is not simply thought of as a physical thing, but as a generative agency within the subject. The body is thus seen as that ineradicable matter by which the subject exists, operates, produces and encounters what is Other to it in the world. This lived body is the perspectival point and limit through which other subjects and objects are engaged and all relationality is conducted. Actively giving sense and form to relationality, the lived body constantly impinges on and shapes the subject's every encounter.

Defining the experiential dynamics of the lived body, phenomenological approaches elaborate the inter-relations between subjects, and between subjects and objects, expressed in terms of physical materiality and its fields. For Merleau-Ponty the body of the perceiving subject is not simply an object, since it cannot be fully perceived as separate by its subject. The body of the subject is a permanence within consciousness from which it can never be divided; as Elin Diamond notes "Rather than being an object *of*, the body anchors us *to* consciousness,"<sup>42</sup> Nor can this body be experienced (felt or seen) or known in the same way that the subject experiences and knows other objects, since the body of the subject is that matter from which sensing and understanding move. As Merleau-Ponty argues,

Insofar as it sees or touches the world, my body can therefore be neither seen nor touched. What prevents it ever being an object, ever being "completely constituted," is that it is that by which there are objects. It is neither tangible nor visible



insofar as it is that which sees and touches.<sup>43</sup>

The body is thus that which is absolutely necessary for experiencing the world and that which can never be fully experienced and objectified by its subject. As Gary Brent Madison argues this phenomenal (and epistemological) paradox of the subject is one which makes impossible any notion of self-possession or identity. The subject is ‘grounded’ in a form from which it is alienated, it is inhered in a materiality that disallows the possibility of self-coincidence.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, whilst the perceiving body is not an object for its subject, it is an object of the perception of other subjects, just as the bodies of other subjects are objects of the perception of the perceiving subject. Individual bodies cannot then be simply classified as either subjects or objects, since they are both simultaneously. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological address, in exploring the materiality of subjects, proposes that all relationality is inherently conducted through and between such a paradoxical body. The notion of the ‘the lived body’ is founded on this paradox.

Elaborating the paradigm of the lived body, Drew Leder’s work, particularly in *The Absent Body* articulates the subject’s lack of pure self presence by identifying contradictions inherent in physical activities of sensation.<sup>45</sup> Leder argues that the body’s sensory operations are organised around a “from-to” structure in which the locus of sensation, the lived body, forms an absence, since it is that point from which sensation encounters exteriorities, and thus is itself never a thematic object of the sensing subject.<sup>46</sup> This dynamic, whilst being common to sight, touch and smell, is typified by Leder in the operations of vision where he notes that the body of the sensing subject eludes its scrutiny: “Wherever I go to gaze at it, it comes with me as itself the source of the gaze.”<sup>47</sup>

Duplications of the subject's body (in mirrors or in other reproductive media), alongside other 'unmediated' forms of self-scrutiny, do not overcome this absence, since they do not allow the subject's body to be apprehended *as it senses*. Here, despite the 'presence' of the subject's body within its own sensory realm, there is no coincidence between the sensing body and the sensed body. The sensing body is always inaccessible to itself.<sup>48</sup> Thus the subject's body, whilst being the source and fulcrum of sensation is also its negation, its inaccessible limit. Leder notes "as the origin of vision, the eyes are also its terminus."<sup>49</sup> The subject's experience takes place directionally *from* the body *to* objects of attention. The subject's body is not a place, not an end in itself, but a means through which exterior objects are felt and gauged, with these objects forming the principal focus of attention. Thus the subject's body is not the thematic object of sensation, it is its "tacit structure".<sup>50</sup> Leder is then able to establish that a general principle of the experiencing body is that it *disappears* from awareness: "insofar as I perceive through an organ, it necessarily recedes from the perceptual field it discloses."<sup>51</sup> In sum, the experiencing body of the subject is *an absent presence*, its sensory capacities operate only through a *self-effacement*.

Furthermore to speak of the subject's body as a perspectival point is perhaps a little deceptive. If it is between subject and object, lacking a full self-presence, yet is simultaneously the seat of the sensory, the term 'perspectival point' is not adequate to describe this paradoxical body since it suggests a solidity, a containment and a stasis within the body as place. The lived body is thus frequently described as *a field*, a mobile and fluctuating set of forces, in which different sensory aspects are constantly shifting in



relation to each other and the world which they are encountering. This notion of a corporeal field is central to Leder's concept of the sensory operation of bodies in states of disharmony or dysfunction. Here Leder suggests that in such states, particularly in illness and in pain, the general recession of the body from the subject's attention shifts: there is a "sensory intensification" in which aspects of the body sensorium are presented for the subject.<sup>52</sup> In this disruption of the from-to structure of sensation the subject's own body becomes the 'to', the thematic object of attention, the field of sensation is re-organised centripetally, temporal and spatial perceptions shift accordingly and the status of other objects of attention diminishes.<sup>53</sup> For Leder this sensory process is one in which the body becomes an "alien presence" within the subject; bodily effacement is reversed but the presence which the body attains is foreign and unwelcome; the presence of an interior object or Otherness. In contrast to the body's general condition of disappearance Leder names this state 'dys-appearance'; the body appears to the subject but in a problematic form. This appearance is in itself another form of absence: the absence of a desired or appropriate bodily state. Most significantly, Leder sees this appearance as one in which *the sensory has an affective relation with the cognitive*. Leder argues that the presenting of the body as an interior Other to the subject "exerts a *telic demand* upon us"; the presence of the Other inspires an interpretative search whose goal is to contain this Otherness through understanding.<sup>54</sup> This is not only an instance in which the sensory demands an epistemic action; the interpretation of this interior Otherness also requires, Leder argues, a shift from using the body as the means of action, to an *acting upon the body of the subject* in question.<sup>55</sup>

Whilst Leder frequently refers to this presenced condition of the subject and the corresponding aspects I have identified as results of the body in dysfunction, it is difficult to ignore the resonance of these observations for experiential encounters which are not literally centered around illness and pain. If, as I have argued in Chapter Three, it is important to attempt to think of the subject beyond the binary terms of life and death, then it must also be important to think of the body in similarly undivided terms as neither ill nor well.<sup>56</sup> The distinction between normative functioning (corporeal-effacement or disappearance) and non-normative functioning (alien corporeal presencing or dys-appearance) seems to be built on a somewhat absolute dichotomy, as if the body can ever be simply experienced as operating properly, or in some pure state of well being. Leder at times undermines his own division by arguing that “precisely because the normal and healthy body (sic) largely disappears” the ‘common’ experience of the body is dominated by conditions corresponding to dysfunction.<sup>57</sup> Thus, what Leder ascribes to the non-normative diseased dysfunctioning body may well be attributed to a body whose normalcy, health and functionality is always impure or disrupted. In fact, noting that “it is characteristic of the body itself to presence in times of breakdown or problematic performance”, Leder is willing to accept occasions of dys-appearance within situations of testing bodily performance, thus opening his observations to a somewhat less clinically deterministic perspective.<sup>58</sup> The aspects of sensory engagement which he identifies as correlates of disease can also be seen as correlates of a more general dis-ease; that of bodies whose affectivity is in question. The condition of experiential bodies whose body is no longer recessive but Other to the subject; whose sensory abilities are turned back on



themselves; whose ability to act on objects is problematised; or whose actions are required to be directed towards the self: all of these conditions may pertain to bodies engaged in a performance, experiencing a “sensory intensification” in which corporeal affectivity exerts an epistemological demand.

Admitting the presences and functions of materially affective bodies into the question of how the knowing subject knows need not necessarily construct that materiality as universal or undifferentiated. The model of a sensory functioning proper or common to an ideal human operation set against and separated from that which deviates from it, is criticised here by resituating ‘deviancy’ within the normative. The lived body then emerges as uncategorically poised between the sensory modes of function and dysfunction: between disappearance and dys-appearance. It is within this rupture of what is proper or common to the lived body that its different particularities may emerge. As Barthes noted the conditions of sensory engagements resist universalisation: they are marked by their individuality and site-specificity. My problematisation of the exclusivity of Leder’s terms of normalcy, health and functionality works against the generalist and universalistic tendencies of these phenomenological theories. It is the attribution of the terms of normalcy, health and functionality to disorderly materialities which works to homogenise them, erasing not only their differences but their particularities. The acknowledgment of the lived body within the knowing subject as a field of dysfunction effectively disarms critical attempts to construct a singular model of proper or normal corporeality. The sensory field of the lived body should then be seen not as a corporeal

foundation of the subject in either a normal or an aberrant state, but precisely as a field; a non-normative zone of physical particularities, and differently affective materialities.

In their conception of the body as its own non-coincidence and as an always relational form theories such as those of Merleau-Ponty and Leder move away from the earlier phenomenological Husserlian stress on the body as a self-evident presence and the experiential as a realm divorced from the empirical world outside of the subject.<sup>59</sup> These later phenomenologies see the affective body as something which is experienced as absent from itself and as part of an intersubjective field. My particular appropriation of these phenomenological perspectives, seeks to revalue lived bodies, without necessarily supposing that there is such a thing as a proper universal lived body, a singular foundational locus of experience existing beneath and prior to cultural and historical inscription. In this respect Diamond is quite justified in her critique of *a* phenomenology which supposes that the human body “perceives outside of the material markings of gender, race or ethnicity”. Assessing the value of ‘the phenomenological project’ for a radical feminist approach to performance theory, Diamond finds phenomenologists unable to account for differences (both material and cultural) between subjectivities, and consequently condemns the phenomenological body as ultimately Humanist, ahistorical, and depoliticised.<sup>60</sup> Joseph Roach in his introductory remarks on the phenomenological section of the *Critical Theory and Performance* volume, similarly asserts with little hesitation that phenomenology is necessarily committed to a stance which “relies on essences” that are considered to be “prior to interpretation”.<sup>61</sup> Whilst Diamond’s attack and Roach’s totalisation are relevant to a substantial and early body of phenomenological



writing they oversimplify the existent diversity of phenomenological thought at that time and its subsequent and increasingly complex trajectory away from notions of the body as a full self-presence whose operations are beneath and prior to the activities of the knowing subject.<sup>62</sup>

Most significantly these later phenomenological elaborations of the body as it is lived, far from being incompatible and philosophically antagonistic to Diamond's project, can be brought to complement and complicate understandings of the ways in which cultural and historical contexts operate in producing particular bodies. Restoring somatic affectivity to the discourses on the constitution of the subject, the concept of the lived body highlights the participating role of ineradicable and particular materialities. Significantly, this does not necessarily indicate that there is an undifferentiated, fundamental, pure or universal body-as-ground-of-experience which affects all subjects similarly, and precedes the knowing subject. As Grosz has argued in relation to the influence of phenomenal notions of the lived body in feminist theory, the acknowledgment of sexual difference within the constitution of the subject, is not necessarily an essentialism if it does not *universalize materialities*, but in the case of feminist theory is concerned to identify differences and anomalies not only between but within a specific sex. There are, of course, materially specific bodies with physiological, sexual and racial particularities. However such bodies cannot know or be known, experience or be experienced, outside of their cultural and historical formation. Such bodies are not simply passive to and inscribed by representation, discourse, culture, or history, they actively constitute them.

Reincarnating and re-animating the lifeless inscribed body, the lived body offers the possibility of conceiving the somatic between experiential and representational understandings. Human bodies, whilst existing within systems of signification, being culturally, discursively and ideologically marked, are not given, natural or passive matter, blank pages awaiting over-writing. There is not a singular natural or universal body on which cultural inscription is imposed. Material bodies work within and against discourse, actively constituting and affecting the knowing subject. Consequently, it is possible to think of experience neither as the operation of an ahistorical, acultural or pre-discursive body, nor as a true ground of the subject operating underneath or before the contexts in which the subject exists. Experience is produced by a body that is at once materially specific and discursively, culturally and historically particular. The experiences of the subject are inseparable from and constitutive of its ways of knowing. Through the concept of the lived body it is possible to discern the material specificities of bodies as they affect experience and knowledge in particular and differing ways. Experience is not then a passivity subordinate to knowledge, nor is it some transcendent category through which to assess knowledges; experience actively constitutes what is known. Knowledge and experience are inter-dependent, inter-forming and inter-implied.

### ***Impossible Subjects of Representation***

First presented as an eleven hour durational performance at the ICA in 1993, Forced Entertainment's *12am: Awake & Looking Down* extracts and temporally extends a scene



from an earlier theatre piece *Emanuelle Enchanted*. Housed in a gallery setting and backed only by a scenic cloth of a starry night sky, five performers draw on two heavily stocked racks of jumble sale clothing and a large number of cardboard signs, to present and reinvent through performance a seemingly endless catalogue of fictive personas. The ease with which this work is so described and its apparently simple structure is beguiling. Witnessed in whatever time spans the audience choose, this work is an immensely complex inhabitation of a space, its objects and signification systems. Irreducible to its properties or structures which form the bare mechanism of the work, the live productions and interactions of the performers are evidently a principal constituent of the event. As such, this work proves a productive structure through which to evaluate the discourses on representational and lived bodies in performance and their role in relationship to the constitution of the subject. With its mass circulation of clothing and cardboard signs against the bodies of individuals, the work is evidently concerned with issues of identity and its representation: the power, credibility and effects of the subject's acts of self-naming. In *12am: Awake & Looking Down* Forced Entertainment perform their bodies in ways which make a critical reduction to symptomatic psychoanalytical or representational schemas of the embodied subject quite problematic. Here the bodies of subjects are neither seen as straightforward instruments of their consciousness nor solely as the receptive objects of discursive or cultural inscription. This work not only positions performance as a means to the subject's quest for self-knowledge, but also explores the ineradicable contribution and effects of the lived corporeal dynamics of this attempt.

Given the ‘simplicity’ of the conception of this work and the apparent clarity of the relations between its properties, it is tempting to cast the work as a microcosm of the social scene within which an extended exploration of the relations between subjects and language takes place. The performers attend to the large selection of clothes and signs as a kind of language reservoir and their utilization resembles a speaking of an experimental vocabulary in which linguistic units are tested-out, discarded, re-used and circulated through the duration of the performance, in a similar fashion to the economies of *Club of No Regrets*. Constructing this work through a semiotic perspective, one might think of the performance as one which makes evident the restless and arbitrary structure of linguistic signs. The signifiers (clothes and cardboard signs) take many different signifieds (performer’s bodies) thus epitomising the open play of signification. Just as the clothes and cardboard signs do not finally nominate a particular body, the signifier has no certain relation to its signifieds. In the unfixing of the signified from the signifier the arbitrary structure of signification becomes apparent. No stable relation between signifier (clothing / cardboard sign) and signified (body) is established, consequently the verity of each relation is apparently dependent on the system of signifieds (the circulation of bodies) and in particular on those signifieds which the signifier is not (the other unlabelled bodies). Proceeding somewhat less literally, one might more comfortably elaborate on the status of the performer’s bodies as signifiers, analysing the circulations and clashes of meaning produced between bodies-as-signs and signs-as-signs, in which the signified of identity is interminably shifting. Both readings would establish a system of somatic signification which is at once mobile and arbitrary.



One might think of the work as analogous of the movement of myth in culture, or even, in a more or less Barthesian mode, as an analogy of its dissection. Etchells' eclectic text reads like an elaborated *dramatis personae* drawn from some impossible play called 'CULTURE'; a catalogue of pluralised contemporary mythologies. Here, names from a vast array of conflicting genres and scenes, in their very phrasing already extracted and decontextualised, are used as the subject's mythus, its surrounding environment and communal economy. The costumes and signs are both the context of the performers and their means of expression. In such a circulating economy, performers are evidently separated from their cultural codings, which are seen to operate *on* bodies and to be made meaningful through their performance. The ritual inhabitation, repetition and re-inscription of myth reflects the means through which the Barthesian cultural encoding takes place.

However, *12am: Awake & Looking Down* is hardly a social microcosm of bourgeois values. Barthes' understanding of myth, as that which secures authority through inevitability and naturalness, through masking its status as a cultural construction, is transformed by Forced Entertainment into an understanding of culture in which this process is now barely sustainable and perpetually undone. The codes which the performers utilise are consciously exposed as open to production and construction, they are evidently inhabited and appropriated. If the body is a readable text hiding ideologies as certainties, then Forced Entertainment are skeptical that any subject reads or performs such mythologies as anything other than cultural and historical contingencies. The myths

to which these subjects are 'committed', are held as artefacts, and often instantly ironised, whilst still being tested for their truth value and their validity as cultural codification. Coinciding with Barthes' understanding of the mythological *mise-en-abyme*, the dissection and exposure of myth as myth, does not lead to some proper or pre-mythological terrain. After a vast process of accumulated discardings and failed namings, the performer's mythological quest is not resolved. No one costume or cardboard sign fits the body. No body is complete without a costume or cardboard sign. The properties of the piece cannot finally be disposed of. If the work epitomises the subject's place and relation to the societal milieu of myth then for Forced Entertainment the edifice of myth is neither finally disposable nor is it sustainable by subjects; myth is seen here as both culturally irreplaceable and redundant as a credence.

From these perspectives, whether thought through the semiotic framework of the body-as-sign, or thought as an enactment and exposure of the semiotising scene of culture, the work might appear as one in which more constant, solid and present individual bodies are wrapped in a mobile and transient linguistic structure, an exterior and imposing system. In this reading the body of the subject is *that which is mapped onto, that which is inscribed by language*. However this is not a work in which subjects are shown to be passive recipients of linguistic, cultural or historical inscription, but one in which performers actively utilise and affect the systems of signification which they inhabit. Expanding these analyses one might think of the work as a performance which corresponds with Foucault's notions of the techniques of the self.<sup>63</sup> The performers are engaged in an active selection and creation of their relation and use of the costumes and signs with which they work.



Resisting the disciplinary operations of power on the body, the subject actively crafts its own space within and against the terms of discourse. The costumes and signs, as cultural artefacts which bestow identity, do not simply reflect cultural values but the specific discursive boundaries available to the performers. Born from cultural knowledges they impose and delimit the subject's realms of action and being. The objectivising of the subject through the imposition of identity, which Foucault identifies as a technology of subjection, is present in the restricted and operative reservoir of names.

Just as the Foucauldian notion of subjection is one which operates on and through the body, the system of costumes and cardboard signs is one which is inhabited by the performers and one which determines their identities and actions through the inscription of their bodies. However here, as in the “struggles against the ‘government of individualization’”, the performers are not pliant and passive subjects, but use their bodies as aesthetic tools, making and remaking identities; they are not simply disciplined but actively self-producing within discursive limits.<sup>64</sup> If the subject suggested here, in a Foucauldian manner, is one available to self-creation, through the molding and manipulation of the body, then the possibilities and extent of these techniques of the self in *12am: Awake & Looking Down* are marked as somewhat limited. This is not some utopian vision of an ever receding horizon of identity, but a performance of limited acts of self-creation taking place within the restrictions of the languages, names and cultural codes available to the performer. In effect this becomes a testing of the discursive limits inherent in the textual expressions and aesthetic of the company. The signs and costumes with which the performers work soon lose their promise of novelty, and are then brought

into an economy of recycling and repetition. The performers thus question, through their inhabitation of these artefacts their validity and utility as technologies of self-creation and subjection.

The cyclical process of the application and shedding of costumes and signs is a familiar technique in Forced Entertainment's work. Here, as with the economy of objects in the self-consciously staged scenes of *Club of No Regrets*, the use of material properties can be seen as an act of reading, a testing of the signifying and discursive limits of the signs and costumes in which the authority of these artefacts, as components of a wider structure of representation, is witnessed as failing. *12am: Awake & Looking Down* is not then, simply a piece which enacts the polysemic nature of language, evoking a multiplicity of referents for the Self, but one which stages the impossibility of the signifier ever fully capturing or fixing its signified, the inherent and insurmountable failure of representation itself, most particularly here, in relationship to the subject's project of self-knowledge. In its establishment of a representational reservoir, addressed by the performing subjects through a systemic but unresolved use, the work might be seen to present both the dominant technologies for the subjection of the Self and the resistant techniques of active subjectivities. Significantly, in *12am: Awake & Looking Down*, neither subjection nor resistance are seen as projects whose goal is attainable. In this work discourse does not finally master the subject, nor is the subject able to perform in a desired, coincident fit of its terms. However what the performance does enact is a witnessing of those terms pushed to their limits. *12am: Awake & Looking Down* stages both the subject's quest to represent the Self to the Self and others, and the subject's quest to know the Self through



representations and others (spectators and performers), but most importantly it stages the non-attainment of the goals of these interdependent projects, through the collapse of representational structures, in their opening to alterity. Performance again constitutes a way of knowing, a way of opening representation to its excluded exteriors, an epistemic technique of the subject.

### *Performing Absent Bodies*

However such an analysis may still underestimate and reduce the work to the limitations of a de-corporealised representational economy. The principal resource of this work, its site of generation and affect, the locale of its cultural critique, is not the cardboard signs and the costumes, the piece's signifying systems or its technologies of discourse, but their particular inhabitation: the living which goes on within and against these discourses. Marked as secondary and repetitious texts, as well-worn currency, the cardboard signs and the costumes fall into the realm of deadened utilities; the cultural value of these properties and their discursive content pales in relation to the ephemeral value of their re-production and re-use. What emerges as the work's subject, as its most significant concern, is the transient production of the performers and their bodies. The content of this work, the work to be done as we witness it, is the corporeal and emotional inhabitation, manipulation, and re-invention of discourse. In the myriad inflections of this complex livedness, a reduction of the work to the conceptions of the passive reception of discourse and signifying systems by the subject, or more promisingly the active resistance of those systems, is evidently inadequate. The realisation that the emphasis of this work lies not in

its representational matter but in the performers' use and re-use of that matter, must lead to a questioning of the mechanics and value of this use, and in particular the role of lived bodies within this production. Moreover, the witnessed inhabitation is not simply a rendition of a cognitive and masterful response by subjects to these discourses, but a performance process in which the lived bodies of the performers are presented as actively engaged in the *constitution* and *non-coincidence* of the subject and discourse.

Within its recurring circuit of patterned actions the performers seem required to invest and exhaust the identities which they perform. The process which they enact is one in which they fit their bodies to a representational schema, performing both within and against the limitations that the representation lays down and simultaneously testing their own physical limitations and performance abilities in relation to it. The representational structures of naming and identity constantly fail to capture or fix their inhabitation which continues remorselessly. This work often requires an exploration of the subversive potential or space within the name, the recovery of fragmentary moments within its possible history, an excavation of its emotional parameters, a testing of its cultural *cachet*. The lived versions of these identities cannot be captured through the Foucauldian binary of resistance and subjection, they are neither simply resolute nor pliant, but are often both simultaneously, sometimes parodic or empathetic, ironical, understated, wrong, plausible, impossible, intense, delicate. In the space of eleven hours the qualities of their inhabitations are too numerous, too inflected, too complex to be reduced to such categorisations. What is common to these inhabitations is that they require an embodiment in order to surface, and



further that *they implicate the field of the lived body in the decision making process, as an agent within the act of naming and self-constitution.*

The choice of costume and cardboard sign is not only a manifest adornment or a treating of the body, but is a decision evidently dependent on the body's responsiveness to, and active revision of this inscription. The performers attempt physical and gestural actions and relations which will coincide with the representation, which will seem to make it fit. The body's physicalisation and experiencing of representation and discourse is in question. How can it be lived? How can the body coincide with and produce its construction through language? Each inhabitation is itself not a transparent or physically passive performance of a name, but an experimental testing in which the corporeal field is animated and employed: these are sensory acts in which spatial and temporal relations with other performers' bodies and with objects play a contributory role in the selection, establishment and negotiation of meaning, in the sustaining of an identity. Thus the work suggests that the act of naming is dependent on somatic affectivity. In this performance the subject cannot find an identity without first living it; self-knowledge is created not simply by discourse or by some disembodied cognition but through and by the participation of the sensory fields of active lived bodies.

Just as the Barthesian acknowledgment of the somatic content of reading is linked to a dissolution of the boundaries of subject and object, so *12am: Awake & Looking Down* stages relations in which this dichotomy is difficult to uphold. In interactions which are active transient and particular, the performing subjects are themselves 'dissolving' into a

recessive structure of language in which no final naming is achieved. The names and material objects with which they work, marked through the company's trash aesthetic, like Barthes' erotic texts are not solid matter but thin, fragmented, contradictory and partial forms. The bodies of the performers which I witness are not then bodies as objects, but bodies divided and falling away from objecthood, from the "objectivising of the subject" through discourse. These bodies are seen as the necessary and generative constituent of discursive inhabitation.

Here, the omissions of the critical readings I have initially advanced, built on the representational body, become apparent. The representational critique tends to extract corporeality out of its lived structure, making it into a wholly visible but unfelt medium in a discursive economy. As Stanton B. Garner, Jr. has argued, approaches to performance which exclude or suppress the "living body and its phenomenal fields" often perceive the performance event as a discrete object in a narrow and principally specular array.<sup>65</sup> Here, the writing subject sees from the impoverished sensorium of the spectator 'existing' above, exterior to, or separate from the conditions of the event. Such a critical position, however hard it argues the significance of subjectivity in reading, reduces the inherently intersubjective exchange of performance to a subject-object relation. The spectating subject is stripped of its own inter-sensory play just as the work loses its experiential content through its reduction into objecthood. To write exclusively of the representational body would be ironically to elide the corporeality of the performance event.



Hence, Taylor Woodrow's work is not analysed in this thesis, in terms such as those posited by Helaine Posner in discussing the prevalence of the fragmented body in contemporary art practices, as a representational trope. Taylor Woodrow's work undoubtedly coincides with common representations of partial figures and indeed Posner's associated metaphors which speaks of the "psychological, social, political and physical assaults on the individual", however in *Going Bye Byes* this is not solely a matter of representational formulation but of lived experience.<sup>66</sup> To write on this work without invoking the sensations involved in its 'witnessing', its use of physical orientation and choreography in space, the memory of other bodily events that these ploys demand, in short its systematic refusal of objecthood and corporeal sensitisation of its audience, would be to reduce the event to a de-materialised specular economy. Such a writing would position its author standing outside of the work (yet somehow within its time) as a privileged but sensorially depleted spectator rather than writing from that subjectivity which the work demands: that of the in-corporated participant.

It is precisely this distinction of subject and object and its correspondent removed spectatorial position which *12am: Awake & Looking Down* is concerned to problematise. The performers constantly falter, regarding themselves and others as they are performing in order to evaluate the performance. This relationality marks the performing subjects as caught in an eerie self-reflexiveness between subject and object, possession and dispossession, embodiedness and disembodiedness. The performers themselves appear to be at once outside of the work looking on whilst still working within. As a spectator I am frequently called on to 'respond'; though the performers are silent there is a powerful



reciprocity between ‘spectators’ and ‘performers’, a kind of emoted feeding. Looking out to me the performers evidently gauge their inhabitation through this reciprocity, extending or curtailing, adjusting a permutation of gesture, an emotional inflection. The act of naming appears not only as dependent upon the affective contribution of the lived body but also as reliant on this livedness within an intersubjective field of relations with others (performers and spectators). Moreover my own involvement in this process as a spectator is not limited to a decorporealised engagement. In signaling that this work requires the presence of the audience in order to motivate, change and produce its processes, the piece is not simply foregrounding the ‘empowered spectator’, but the necessity of the work’s sensory inter-relationality. In the physical proximity and relation of this work my presence as a participant-spectator is exposed as a requirement of the work’s meaning and creation. Consequently *my* understanding of the performance, my constitution of knowledges of myself and culture through the performance, are not separable from the experience of the event, from my own corporealised engagement.

However, this work also figures the experiential in a more complex relation. If, as I have argued earlier, representational structures are witnessed as failing in this work, a failure which is intimately linked to the subject’s project of self-knowledge, then this work is also concerned to present this failure as one which is built on *the non-coincidence of the lived body with the representational body, the mis-fit of the subject’s experience and its knowledge*. The inhabitation of costumes and cardboard signs is not resolved into a consistent or lasting correspondence for the performer. There is no final rendition, no singularly fitting physical relation to the performer’s properties. It is not only the case that



the choice and performance of these identities is dependent on corporeal constitution, but that this very living of discourse is always incomplete, flawed, requiring supplemental attention. The subject's identity is never coincident with the experience which constitutes it.

There are, however, aspects of the work which suggest a further presentation of the experiential dynamics of the lived body. The eleven hour duration of this work has its own effect on the bodies of the performers as the performed failure of the naming attempts slides into and becomes inseparable from a further register of failure born from physical tiredness, or slowness of response, or a certain dullness of relation between participants. Here I sometimes sense a performer resting within their inhabitation of a name, or a routineness of response or relation, or a long passage of mechanical performance where no effect seems to arise and yet within which the sense of utter limitation, at the frayed edge between actual and performed registers, is suddenly felt again. This sense of limitation is not so much about the performer's inability to make representation stick, but a troubling failure of performance itself: the inability of the lived body to experience itself as it experiences.

Similarly, within their incessant circulation the performers infrequently return to one of two choreographic tropes held at physical extremes: facing the audience they run on the spot as if looking towards a distant horizon, or in a rare relief from the activities of naming they rest in a chair, again looking out, but this time in a removed contemplation. These tropes, as dynamic counterpoints to the work's other actions, as both a reduction and a

magnification of its existing physical patterns, appear to offer a dense metaphorical qualification of the work's meanings. In their removal of the active subject from the processes of naming, and in the clarity of their embodiment of a particular relation between thought and action, these movements establish a principle proper to the subject's performance whose significance is wider than the relation to self-representation. In this repeated trope the individual performers, rather than being concerned with matching their experiential bodies to a self-representation, appear to be concerned with experiencing themselves as they experience.

Here the body is performed at extremes of sensation: in the running it seems utterly pressed towards a non-apparent cognitive goal, then subsequently, at rest it is falling away into passivity whilst the mind actively speculates. In both states the performer's cognitive action on their own body is not evident: the structure of self-naming falls away. Yet in both states there is a sense of a residing quest: to experience the body at an extreme of presence, either within the presencing or directly after it; as if in the purity of this heightened physicality some other form of self-coincidence might arise: not the coincidence of representation with experience but the coincidence of experience as it is experienced. Perhaps these are moments akin to Leder's description of the dys-appearing body within which, in a state of sensory intensification, the subject's own body forms the focus of its attention. The running body is pressed towards running itself, to experience running as it happens. At such times the body becomes present to itself, suspending the lived experience of somatic effacement. Yet this presence is but an absence of a desired state: the state of full self-coincidence, the finality of identity. Rising from its rest, the



performer's body re-submits itself to the quest for self-representation. The presencing which this "problematic performance" has brought about exerts a further epistemic demand to know the self. In the failure of the running and resting bodies to become coincident with themselves I witness the limit of the lived body and the experiential realm: its originary disappearance.

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald Bouchard, Blackwell, 1977: 148.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, Indiana University Press, 1994: 9-10.

<sup>3</sup> Grosz: 3.

<sup>4</sup> Antonin Artaud, *Artaud on Theatre*, ed., Claude Schumacher, Methuen, 1989: 99.

<sup>5</sup> The key phenomenological terms of 'livedness' and 'the lived body' are elaborated later in this chapter. See pages 152-162.

<sup>6</sup> Essentialist notions of subjectivity and identity are explored and persuasively critiqued in *Which Homosexuality?*, ed. Dennis Altman et al, Gay Men's Press, 1988, and Edward Stein, *Forms of Desire*, Garland, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through The Body*, CUP, 1988: 2-9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*: 8.

<sup>9</sup> I will discuss the potential essentialism of phenomenological perspectives in the coming section. See pages 152-162.

<sup>10</sup> This piece was first performed at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, September 1993.

<sup>11</sup> See pages 112-114.

<sup>12</sup> Grosz: 8-10.

<sup>13</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, tr. Annette Lavers, Paladin, 1987.

<sup>14</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, tr. Richard Miller, Noonday, 1994: 22.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*: 23.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*: 61.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*: 16.



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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*: 21,39.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*: 49, 51-52.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*: 14,21.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*: 61.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*: 62.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*: 55-57.

<sup>24</sup> Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, tr. Richard Howard, New York, 1977. As I have already suggested the presence of the personal and of the autobiographical within critical theory raises questions around the verity of the distinction between the public and the private, a dualism that is intimately linked to the mind-body schism. It is therefore not surprising that the body, the binary's suppressed term, should trouble Barthes in this mode of writing. Barthes' perturbation around his ability to contain and secure the meaning and value of the body reflects its elusiveness to theories which devalue its affective significance. A more comprehensive and detailed tracing of the place and use of the body within Barthes' work is needed within the related critical *oeuvre*. Unfortunately such a study lies outside of the terms of this thesis. For a short and somewhat dissatisfying summary of Barthes' treatment of the body see Michael Moriarty, *Roland Barthes*, Cambridge, 1991: 186-194.

<sup>25</sup> In particular I have in mind the work of Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, Methuen, 1980, and Elaine Aston and George Savona, *Theatre as Sign-System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance*, London, 1991. More complex additions to this body of work include Susan Melrose, *A Semiotics of the Dramatic Text*, London, 1994, and Patrice Pavis, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*, Routledge, 1992.

<sup>26</sup> Aston and Savona: 102-108.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*: 107.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*: 114-115.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*: 116.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*: 120-122.

<sup>31</sup> Though it is a recurrent argument in his work, in particular this perspective is comprehensively advanced in Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, tr. Alan Sheridan, Harmondsworth, 1979.

<sup>32</sup> Rosalyn Diprose, *The Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment and Sexual Difference*, London, 1994: 134.

<sup>33</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', an afterword in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Hemel Hempstead, 1982: 208-226.

<sup>34</sup> Diprose: 21.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*: 21-22.

<sup>36</sup> Foucault: 211.

<sup>37</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London, 1990: 143. Diprose: 35.

<sup>38</sup> Grosz: 8-10.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*: 138-159.

<sup>40</sup> In particular I will draw on Drew Leder, *The Absent Body*, University of Chicago Press, 1990, and in relation to theatre and performance Stanton B. Garner Jr., *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama*, CUP, 1994.

<sup>41</sup> Leder: 5.

<sup>42</sup> Elin Diamond, 'The Violence of "We": Politicizing Identification', *Critical Theory and Performance*, eds. Janelle Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach, University of Michigan Press, 1992: 394.



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<sup>43</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. Colin Smith, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962: 90-92.

<sup>44</sup> Gary Brent Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, Ohio University Press, 1981: 25.

<sup>45</sup> Leder: 11-35.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*: 15-17.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*: 12.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*: 14.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*: 12.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*: 17.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*: 14. The principal tenet of Leder's approach is that the body's recession from awareness within common experience is intimately linked to the philosophical tendency to omit the body's significant role within understandings of the self.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*: 71.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*: 74-75.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*: 77.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*: 79.

<sup>56</sup> See pages 88-134.

<sup>57</sup> Leder: 86.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*: 83, 85.

<sup>59</sup> Garner, for instance, insists that phenomenology has moved beyond Edmund Husserl's conception of human presence as "unitary self-givenness": 18-51.

<sup>60</sup> Diamond: 394.

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<sup>61</sup> Joseph Roach, 'Introduction', *Critical Theory and Performance*, eds. Janelle Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach, University of Michigan Press, 1992: 353-355. This assertion is made despite Bert O.

States assertion in Roach's own edited volume that

when we speak of criticism in the phenomenological mode, we are referring less to a relentless methodology or a deep philosophical concern for *the nature* of consciousness than to an attitude that manifests itself *with varying degrees of purity* and one that may come and go in a given exercise as critical objectives change. [my italics]

<sup>62</sup> These shifts are discussed by Garner: 18-39, and by Grosz: 86-114.

<sup>63</sup> Foucault: 208-226.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*: 212.

<sup>65</sup> Garner: 45-51.

<sup>66</sup> Helaine Posner, 'Separation Anxiety', *Corporal Politics*, Beacon Press, 1992: 22.



## 5. Disarticulating Identity

For these things, I shall, upon the floor walk, untying the straps, releasing the buckles, to see what I have brought with me. What is it I have been holding, what is it I hold. Watch me. And as the last stride is declared, to see what it is now I possess. [...] I walk to confront the ground, that which supports my two feet. The ground is the beginning and end of existence.<sup>1</sup>

### *Walking Home*

For twenty five days in May 1994 at The Showroom gallery Gordana Stanisic walked the distance from London to Belgrade on a Tunturi treadmill, marking on a map at the end of each day the route she would have taken to her war-torn former home, had her journey not been delimited by its imaginary status, or entirely bounded by political realities. The physical and durational nature of this work invokes deeply ingrained structures of cultural meta-narrative in which the individual undertakes an epic journey pressed towards a form of personal and thematic resolution. Stanisic's use of a Japanese-made exercise machine to facilitate her imaginary journey, a symbol of leisure and health within its familiar locale, is a re-contextualisation (typical for installation) of an object within a gallery setting and importantly, within the quest parameters of the work; an aesthetic ploy which casts stark shadows over the object's associated civil 'freedoms'. Stanisic's work is a powerful commentary on the plight of the refugee, the physical, psychic and emotional constraints of exile, and the resonance, attraction and repulsion for the subject, of places of origin. The ostensible place towards which Stanisic is heading is of course broken apart by social conflict generated from disputes around historical belonging and the status of the nation-

home. As such the performance-installation offers a charged address to the human consequences of the vicious conflict in the Former Yugoslavia, and the wider contexts of nationalism and national division within Europe. Beyond the specificities of its discourse on the human implications of the resurgence of the personal and political force of national identity, this work inflects a powerful address to broader questions of the construction and operation of identity itself. Though Stanisić's durational action, has obvious epic dimensions, it sustains a complex and critical relation towards the meta-narrative structures it invokes and the resolutions and goals of such narratives. For whilst Stanisić's return home, at a superficial level, might be seen as a literal enactment of nostalgia, an attempt to present the personal necessity and cultural importance of return to a place of national origin, it simultaneously undermines and interrogates the quest for such a place.

Significantly the place towards which Stanisić's action is directed is not simply Belgrade, but a much broader sense of an originary place for which Belgrade stands as only one constitutive signifier. The objective towards which Stanisić is pressed, cannot be reduced to the knowledges gleaned from secondary material around the work. Whilst watching the performance itself, the spectators may have some knowledge of Stanisić's ethnicity since her national identity is inferred in publicity material and obliquely evident through her name. They are also, of course, charged with making connections between her actions and the map which they may find on the gallery wall. This map makes apparent one possible target towards which her journey is directed, a nation(ality) evident within the frame of the map and identifiable through the thrust of her documentary line. Though each of these elements of information may shape the spectatorship of the work, the



performance itself and its elusive objective is not reducible to these indicators. The deceptive simplicity of this work, comprised of little more than the blank action of walking, is the condition for a complex series of associations. As I stand facing Stanisic, 'held' in an acute phenomenal awareness, the repetitive padding of her feet on rubber, whir of the Tunturi, beads of sweat, eyes veiling thoughts elsewhere, the sound of her breath activating a sense of mine, I am swamped by multiple and fleeting resonances. In the grip of this excessive production of meanings and emotions, which seem entirely predicated on the simplicity and blankness of this work, I am unable to wrestle this tumult into a cohesive interpretation of the refugee's need for, quest towards, and attainment of, a nation-home.

For whilst Stanisic is ostensibly walking to Belgrade, she is also going headlong into *her Self*, into an isolation of singular action and its accompanying introspective production of thoughts. She does not speak to me, rather I am simply called on to witness her separated activity. Even as the singular spectator of this work, I am not its only witness as there is a more complex degree of witnessing taking place within this piece. Suspended within the white void of the gallery, caught in the isolation of her activity, Stanisic walks head bowed in a self-regarding gesture, or looking 'out' with the interiority of focus which comes with strenuous exercise. Stanisic then, performs a continuous self-return, a looking upon and into herself which breaks with the singular directionality of the subject-object relation within the habitual specular economy of the gallery. As the principal element of the work, her body is not simply the object of the spectating subject's gaze, but the object of her own gaze as a spectator.



Stanisic watches herself. Moreover, this watching takes place as her body undergoes its strenuous task; she is attempting to see herself in those moments when she should be most present to herself, within the heightened sensorium of physical exertion. The work then, enacts a kind of continuous energised self-vigil which may seem to promise a self-stability, against and through her actual agitation, perhaps granted by a corporeal presencing. This promise is echoed in Stanisic's programme notes where she proclaims,

My body shall be this vehicle to hold my actions. My mind shall be this vehicle to hold my actions. My emotions shall be this vehicle to hold my actions. That record, document, which I will then possess. And if the definition of a book is a collection, fastened together, protected by covers, then this shall be my book. I shall be that book, and every page shall contain a single stride.<sup>2</sup>

Stanisic is then, in a physical, cognitive and emotional sense, a witness to herself. That which constitutes her Self is witnessing her actions. The aggregates of Stanisic (body, mind, emotion) are described as vehicles, as media, through which the event takes place, yet they are also described as the *repositories* of the actions which constitute the event. The witnessing is thus not simply seen as a physical, cognitive and emotional awareness or 'recognition', but a "hold", a fixing and containment of her actions. It is through this 'holding' that Stanisic will attain a permanent and stable residue of the event. Thus it appears within the logic of this statement that she is called to record that which she herself enacts. Further, this recording, as she notes, *will be her*, it will become her identity, or rather, her identity will be constituted by recording. In both Stanisic's witnessing of herself within the performance event and her poetic re-articulation of the dynamics of this work, she thus associates her durational action with a quest for identity. In both cases it



seems that the performance may offer a 'recording', a frozen and stabilised version, a ground, of her Self.

Of course Stanisic does not walk on the floor, as she suggests in her notes. Her walk is in fact suspended, not merely in the sense that it takes place within the space of the gallery, which removes her activity from its supposed terrain. She is also suspended above the floor upon the treadmill, whose incline, in order to facilitate the belt's rotation and a comfortable posture for the user, suggests a trajectory away from the ground and into the air. Even when she has paced the distance from London to Belgrade, she will be no more 'grounded' than when she left. These different spatial suspensions enable a figuration of the object of her walk as impossible. What's more, in the cyclical grip of the treadmill she is suspended in motion, so that her every step forward is marked by a sense of physical stasis and inertia. Here, as in the work of Goat Island, Forced Entertainment and Taylor Woodrow, a use of repetitive action enables the creation of a specific relationship between the body and time. In the steady pad of Stanisic's steps, her body treads out a rhythmic calibration of her journey, *a pacing*, which indicates a temporal marking. The progression of this action and the time which it marks, is challenged through her body's evident stasis. Thus the ground which Stanisic supposedly "confronts" in this piece, the objective towards which she is so powerfully propelled, is not confronted physically, since it is never physically progressed towards, never touched, never reached. She does not walk on the ground, but instead walks towards a ground which she cannot meet. Further, it appears that her body, the very medium through which this ground may be met, prevents her from reaching it. Her body is no more in the place towards which it has been pressed at the end

of the performance, than it was when it began. Perhaps the only aspect of Stanislav's Self which might be said to have reached Belgrade is her imagination. The ground which she confronts is thus shown as an imaginary production, as the effect of a cognitive activity which I, the spectator, am unable to access.

The introspective nature of this performance itself prompts a further effect. As I watch Stanislav I feel compelled to speculate on, and produce my own thoughts around, what Stanislav herself may be thinking. There is a strong conflict between the dynamism of the work and the absence of its explanation or articulation. I not only watch her watching herself, but also I watch her thinking about that self-watching. Within this silence filled with her thought, I inevitably 'identify' with Stanislav, or rather I project onto her what I imagine she is thinking; perhaps what motivates her, or how she is feeling: what meanings she is now producing. In this projection I am not only prompted to create for Stanislav an interior terrain of thought, motive and emotion, but I am made aware that this projection and the interiority it creates will never be corroborated; it is soon apparent that she is not going to speak to shape or confirm my thoughts. In this way the performance again makes evident the impossibility of the creation of a ground of identity for Stanislav, but this time *by its spectator*, since the projection of those elements of motive, thought and emotion which might cohere into an identification are simultaneously strongly required and ultimately marked as without verification.

Through the complex aesthetics of this simple work, the employment of an intense physicalisation that does not deliver presence or place, the use of repetitive action which



indicates a non-progressive relation between the body and time, a spatial suspension, and an inviting silence which annuls the possibility of her identification, the ostensible quest of this work, the journey to Belgrade, is opened towards a much broader resonance of place. Beyond this opening, Stanasic's performance is not simply an imaginary return to her specific place of origin, it is a quest for the ground of her Self, an attempt to reach that stable and unitary place which would secure for her an identity. This project of the attainment of identity is marked through performance as one which will remain perpetually unresolved. In her accompanying programme notes, this understanding of identity as an impossible goal for the subject, inherent within Stanasic's work, is not advanced explicitly; here she chooses to articulate a somewhat different rendition of identity. Elaborating on the motives behind the work, she articulates a very specific temporalisation of the relation between the subject and identity. In her return to a place of origin, Stanasic indicates that she is attempting to understand that identity with which she is *already imprinted* ("to see what it is I have been holding"), as well as that identity which after the performance, she will have sought and attained ("to see what it is now I possess"). Thus identity, in Stanasic's commentary on this piece, is a formation that is both inherent within the subject and that which the subject seeks. It is both before, within and in front of the subject. As such identity is not something which the subject can erase or escape from, it is already integral to the subject (its history), and the object (its future) of the performance quest (its present).

Stanasic's work raises important questions around the relationships between the subject, performance and identity. What is the subject's relation to identity and how is it acquired,

held, changed or reinforced? What lies behind the difference between Stanislavski's scriptural conception of identity and its formulation within the event of the performance? Can identity be described in the terms Stanislavski suggests in her programme as both the ground and goal of the subject? Why is it that the very category of identity towards which Stanislavski's performance work is pressed is marked as an imaginary goal and as an impossible objective? What is the critical significance of the role which performance plays in this destabilisation of identity? What are the philosophical and political justifications of such acts of identity abrogation?

### *Aggregates of Identity*

Throughout this thesis a specific formulation of the relationship between identity and performance has been accumulating. In particular the thesis has focused on the logics and operations of the knowing subject. Elaborating distinct contexts through which to understand the epistemological practices and experiential structures of this subject, the thesis has argued that the specific performance aesthetics which I have discussed, present and affect a dispersal of the subject's tendency towards the establishment of knowledges. Through a discussion of the fates of moral and ethical theory within contemporary critical thinking, a model of ethics was advanced which was reliant upon the opening of epistemological limits within the act of reading. This model enabled an identification of such practices of reading within the aesthetics of performance, where performance was seen to turn towards its own discursive construction, initiating a correspondent opening of the spectating subject's knowledges. Here performance was shown to enact a challenge to



the habitual economies of the Self; the subject's routine practices of epistemic exclusion and reduction in relation to the 'unknown Other'. This Other was initially analysed as that meaning which language, discourse and consciousness fail to articulate or represent, and then subsequently understood in terms of its embodiment within the particular others which the subject encounters. The opening of epistemological limits which performance was seen as instigating, was then re-described, not simply in terms of an exposure to a general linguistic or discursive alterity, but in terms of the initiation of a particular relation with one of contemporary culture's most profound alterities: death. Through readings of the social and cultural logics of the exclusion of death's annulling force, further performance aesthetics were analysed in terms of their agitation and subversion of these logics and their operation upon the spectating subject. The effects of performance upon the subject were thus paralleled with the psychic dynamics of trauma. Extending the analysis of those areas of experience which the subject actively seeks to exclude from its cognitive and perceptual activities, a reading of the troubled relation between the subject and its body was advanced. Through an analysis of the differences and problematics of linguistic and phenomenological understandings of the body, the habitual economies of the Self were seen to be dependent upon a diminution of the subject's own phenomenal realities to the orders of language. Specific performance aesthetics were seen to bring this reduction into relief, making evident the mechanisms and limits of this habitually reductive operation of the spectating subject.

Whether in relation to a generalised linguistic alterity, or the specific alterities of death and the 'lived body', a model of the subject has emerged which is predicated on stabilising and



exclusionary epistemological practices. Of course, the knowledges which the subject generates and employs are not simply directed towards the world outside of the subject, the world of objects. As I have already argued through the frame of phenomenology, the subject is an object of its own consciousness, and furthermore, is concerned to establish self-understandings which are necessary to its successful social operation. In this respect, the subject attempts to cohere self-knowledges; those objects which would satisfy a constitutive and unitary impetus of identity. Such movements of self-constitution similarly take place on the basis of the suppression and repulsion of experiences and knowledges which may threaten the subject's functional and hermetic singularity. These understandings lead to further questions which qualify those raised by Stanisic's performance. What categories of knowledge enable the subject to constitute a discrete and solid identity? What is the subject's relation to these categories? How do the opening and destabilising dynamics of performance work in relation to these categories and the subject's creation of such an identity?

From the analyses which I have so far advanced, the inability of the subject to constitute an identity on the basis of its own body is apparent. Since the phenomenal experience of the subject is both ineradicable and radically inaccessible to it, the possibility of the subject establishing its body as a ground of self-knowledge and identity is seriously disabled. As I have already argued in Chapter Four, performance has the capacity to present this dilemma to the spectating subject. However, the techniques through which performance comes to problematise the possibility of solid and hermetic self-constitution are more complex than this initial analysis admits, and will be seen to involve not only a problematic



relation between the subject and its phenomenal reality, the lived body, but also equally irresolvable relations between the subject and those deeply ingrained cultural categories which are employed as *aggregates of identity*. Identity conferring categories such as nationality, race, sexuality, sex and gender, can all be seen as discursive tools within the subject's project of self-constitution. These terms are often employed in culture, and by individual subjects, as a means of creating a firm ground of the Self and are actively involved in a naturalisation of their relation to the subject and a concealment of their discursive formulation of, and operation upon, it. Though it would be possible to examine each of these terms in relation to their appearance and perturbation in contemporary performance works, in this concluding section I will specifically focus on the theoretical explorations of the questions of sex and gender. Despite this narrowing of theoretical focus the analysis will also be seen to have a direct bearing on Stanisic's problematisation of nation as an object of the subject's quest and as an identity conferring category. In addition to the analysis of the destabilising relation between the body and its subject which I have already advanced, this discussion will elaborate the means through which performance may perturb these culturally significant aggregates of identity, in order to *disarticulate the cohesive structure of identity itself*.

Just as Elizabeth Grosz departed from an inscriptional model of the body, Judith Butler's theories in her influential work *Gender Trouble*, move beyond the social / cultural constructionist model of identity formation.<sup>3</sup> Sharing aspects of a constructionist analysis, Butler asserts that cultural discourse produces the subject. This creation of the subject is not one which takes place through some kind of benign or neutral order, but is, from the



outset, a political matter and an exercise of power. Whilst the discourses which shape the subject are historically and culturally specific, they do conform to identifiable orders. In particular, Butler asserts that the hegemonic forces of patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality are brought to bare in the crafting of subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> In this way discourse shapes and conditions the very being of the subject. Thus for Butler, as for many social / cultural constructionists, a foundational, essential or universal notion of identity is a myth constituted by discourses of power in order to conceal their own operation. However, it is here that Butler's thought takes a significant critical leap. The subject, for Butler, is not an entity outside and before discourse awaiting presentation by it. Rather, "the domains of political and linguistic 'representation' set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject."<sup>5</sup> Just as Grosz has turned to question the notion of the body as a passive materiality prior to discourse and awaiting inscription by it, Butler questions the category of sex as a 'given' facticity upon which a culturally formulated gender is imprinted. For Butler many constructionist analyses implicitly assume this 'sexed facticity'.

The relation between sex and gender, Butler argues, even within many feminist theories influenced by constructionist and poststructuralist writing, has been perceived through the same Cartesian structures of thought which have perpetuated the dualism of mind and body. Falling within this binary logic, sex is often seen as an inert materiality, a physical attribute of a body upon which gender co-ordinates are mapped. Butler seeks to question whether the sexed body exists *prior to discourse*, as the simple "ground surface or site of



cultural inscription” and thus to destabilise the binary thinking upon which this notion is dependent.<sup>6</sup> In her critique of these orders of thought, Butler relocates sex, not as a naturally given physicality on which gender is overlaid, but rather as a term which is itself instituted by discourses in the service of patriarchal and heterosexual power. Working through close re-interpretations of Foucault’s essay on *Herculine Barbin*, Butler asserts *that sex is inscribed as a cause of human behaviour and desire*, by such hegemonic discourses of power.<sup>7</sup> These discourses, or following Foucault “regime[s] of sexuality”, instate the binary distinction of male and female within this *causal sex*, and order and contain the possibilities of relations and interactions upon this basis.<sup>8</sup> Within this understanding sex loses its status as a prediscursive materiality and is instead seen as a discursively produced category. Put simply, sex becomes gendered. As Butler argues,

Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex [...]; gender must also designate the very *apparatus of production* whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive / cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or a ‘natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive’, prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts. [my italics]<sup>9</sup>

If both sex and gender are discursive inscriptions, whose necessary and causal relation is a fiction staged by discourses of power, then it follows that sex does not necessarily determine gender. If this is the case, there is a strong possibility of disrupting the operations of orders of power, and gendering the individual differently, in ways which are not limited by the sex of the subject. For Butler then, gender is not an object that the subject *can be*, but rather is a form which the subject *may become*. Consequently, Butler argues, gender is not “a noun or a substantial thing or a static cultural marker”, it is



instead “ a kind of becoming or activity”.<sup>10</sup> Gender is thus seen by Butler as a “normative ideal” rather than as an immutable condition of subjectivity. The normalisation of the subject which gender attempts to impose is one which would deliver a causal aspect in order to explain and justify the subject’s activities, an “internal coherence” to the subject, founding and stabilizing it through its constitution of the subject as an identity.<sup>11</sup> Gender hides its becoming in order to institute being.

Those discourses which seek to establish notions of a coherent and stable identity for the subject, are dependent upon the employment and regulation of the binary distinction of the Self and the Other. The subject’s identity is founded on a firm differentiation and exclusion. Male is not female, gay is not straight, black is not white and Serb is not Croat. As Kristeva has noted in *The Powers of Horror*, to become stable, this differentiation is accompanied by an ordering in spatial terms, a bounding of an identity. An ‘impermeable’ barrier is erected between that which is determined as the Self (marked as the inside) and that which is determined as its Other (marked as the outside).<sup>12</sup> The subject’s body is one such bounded site. In this spatialisation of the subject, identity takes the place of the interior of the subject. The body thus becomes the vessel of the subject’s identity. For Kristeva and many other cultural theorists, the imperatives placed on the maintenance of such boundaries by discourses of power are evidenced in the cultural codification and social policing of bodily activities which evidently transgress these discourses of power.<sup>13</sup> The preservation of the integrity of such boundaries is of vital significance to the purchase and validity of identity categories. Through the regulation and (fragile) maintenance of the



boundaries of the subject, interiority is intrinsically associated with the truth of the Self, just as exteriority is intrinsically associated with the Other. As Butler argues,

‘inner’ and ‘outer’ constitute a binary distinction that stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject. When that subject is challenged, the meaning and the necessity of the terms are subject to displacement. If the ‘inner world’ no longer designates a topos, then the internal fixity of the self and, indeed, the internal locale of [...] identity, become similarly suspect.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, the discourses of power which sanction and maintain the subject’s identity may be brought into question through activities which breach the boundaries of the self, or *contest its spatialisation*. As I have already argued in detail, specific performance aesthetics can be seen to effect a challenge to the habitual economies of the Self, an opening of the subject’s epistemological boundaries, to its Other. In response to Kristeva and Butler’s arguments, it then becomes important to ask, through what means, and to what extent, can performance be seen not only to contest the distinction of Self and Other, but the boundaries which are constituted in the spatialisation of the subject, and the casting of identity as the subject’s interiority? These are questions to which I will shortly return.<sup>15</sup>

In her interrogation of the means through which categories of identity are instituted, how the body of the subject is gendered, Butler maintains that identity is produced as an interiority, as an “internal core or substance” *by performative acts*; the actions, gestures and expressions which the subject makes regarding itself.<sup>16</sup> The now familiar model of the linguistic performative is employed because these signifying acts are actions whose meaning is contingent and can never be verified; the identity which they express is only a

promise, an “illusion” staged by discourses of power. Butler thus asserts that the “gendered body is performative”, and that “it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality”.<sup>17</sup> In effect Butler asserts that there is no identity lying behind the subject’s actions, there are instead just *subjective acts which produce identities*. Butler summarises this assertion in colloquial terms: it is not necessary to conceive of the subject as the “doer behind the deed”, rather “the doer is variably constructed in and through the deed”.<sup>18</sup> In their creation of the illusion of identity these acts service the discourses of power which seek to control the subject. By establishing identity as the interior of the subject they create a causality which masks their own imposing operation; “the displacement of a political and discursive origin of gender onto a psychological ‘core’ precludes an analysis of the political constitution of the gendered subject and its fabricated notions about the ineffable interiority of its sex or of its true identity”.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Performing Identities***

The significance of Butler’s assertions in *Gender Trouble*, beyond the immediate implications for feminist theory, is that those categories which can be seen to constitute identity, cannot offer it a ground or a stability, they rather emphasise again, its contingency, its reliance on discourse and its openness to production. The notion of an internally cohering and stable essence belonging to the subject, in other words, the notion of a true self, is one which is not only seen as dependent upon discursive production, but on sedimented performative acts which work in the service of an insidious construction,



regulating and dominating the subject according to patriarchal and heterosexual orders of thought. Having established that (aggregates of) identity, to exist at all, must be enacted and performed, Butler turns to the question of the political possibilities of such performances. Since it is necessarily the case that (gender) identity is produced by and within patriarchal and heterosexual conventions, it might seem that there is little possibility of a (gender) identity arising as a contradiction or contestation of such orders. But as Butler notes, the idea that identity, in particular gender identity, is a stable category, is highly dubious. The commanding discourses which construct identities do not simply descend upon the subject in some definitive moment (say in childhood) and then remain everlastingly and immutably imprinted on the subject, rather they are constantly re-inscribed, and as such are not static, but complex and mobile formations. It is their very mobility which opens them to different possibilities of “intervention and re-signification”. Further Butler questions whether every act of identification is simply supportive of the regulatory discourses of patriarchy and heterosexuality which she seeks to critique. Opening up a space for the subversion of such discourses, Butler contends that “to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of power”.<sup>20</sup> Is it possible, she asks, to perform identities in ways which are not simply re-iterations of the problematic discursive regimes which order them; “are there forms of repetition that do not constitute a simple imitation, reproduction and hence consolidation of the law [...]?”<sup>21</sup> Such performances Butler argues, would be ones that rather than seeking to escape the discursive matrices of power, enact a subversive re-working of it, and thus expose this very matrix as a phantasmatic structure. For Butler this exposure is one which would unveil the contingent and enacted institution of gender identity,



deconstructing “the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locat[ing] and account[ing] for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender”.<sup>22</sup>

As I have already argued, the subject’s body is the locale and border around which discourses of power are instituted, but this understanding leads to a recognition that it is *through the body* that a radical contestation of these orders may be made. As Grosz notes,

As well as being the site of knowledge-power, the body is thus a site of resistance, for it exerts a recalcitrance, and always entails the possibility of a counter-strategic reinscription, for it is capable of being self-marked, self-represented in alternative ways.<sup>23</sup>

This notion of the body as a locale for resistance to hegemonic discourses has important implications for performance and performance theory within which the possibilities of reinscriptive actions may be explored. Butler similarly locates subversive possibilities within “the social action of bodies within the cultural field” which she thinks “can withdraw the very power of reality that they themselves invested” in the categories of identity.<sup>24</sup> Butler’s theoretical aim here is highly ambitious, and it is one which stretches beyond the previously defined terms of feminist analysis. Her work is not simply concerned to problematise the validity and cohesion of notions of femininity, rather, it aims to enact,

a thoroughgoing appropriation and redeployment of the categories of identity themselves, not merely to contest ‘sex’, but to articulate the convergence of multiple sexual discourses at the site of ‘identity’ in order to render that category, *in whatever form*, permanently problematic. [my italics]<sup>25</sup>



Thus the significance of her analysis of categories of identity is that it can be employed beyond its specific foci of sex and gender, towards analyses of the disassembly of identity in all its forms. In *Gender Trouble* Butler's principle target for the exemplification of subversive possibilities which might enact this disarticulation of identity is performance. In particular she focuses on questions of the sexual politics of drag, which she sees as a performance form which contests "the notion of a true gender identity".<sup>26</sup> At the core of Butler's argument in relation to drag is the notion that, as a theatrical form, drag stages a relation between the sexed body, a gendered body and a performed gender which destabilizes the notion of gender identity itself, by exposing its mimetic and contingent status. The marking of sex as an origin of the self is thus not only revealed as illusionary, but the product of regulative discourses around gender.

Butler's comments in relation to drag (explicitly challenging the feminist analyses of drag which figure it as derisory and misogynist) have been extensively debated and contested. It is not my intention to take a position within these debates which are already highly saturated and positional. Butler's initial work has prompted swathes of analysis in relation to charged areas of cultural practice, such as the performances of drag kings as well as queens, the butch-femme aesthetic, transvestitism and transexuality, all of which take as their literal ground the issues of identity politics.<sup>27</sup> In fact the objects of my critical approach, the performance-installations by Stanasic and, in the final section of this thesis by Forced Entertainment, do not take gender and sex as their primary categories of address in relation to the issue of identity, in the way in which drag and these other performances inevitably do. Whilst her comments are sweeping in relation to drag,



nonetheless the core notions which Butler here employs, that categories of identity are instituted through performative acts, that they create a fiction of an identity as a true interiority of the subject, and that these instatements may themselves be brought into question by the use of bodies in social actions, will be seen to be highly productive in relation to these works. It is unfortunate that Butler maintains a 'troubling' distance from the very cultural artefacts which she seeks to invest with the radical political promise of her theories; in *Gender Trouble* there is little attention to aesthetics, and a strong resistance to move beyond the disciplinary language of philosophy. She does note, however, that the political power of acts of parody (within which drag is hastily classified) is dependent upon form and context, but she then shies away from any sustained analysis of such forms or such contexts. Most usefully for a discussion of the aesthetic means through which identity may be disarticulated, Butler argues that the inscription and sedimentation of categories of identity around the subject's body is dependent upon *continuous repetition*, in order that the body's subjection to such categories be maintained. Consequently this very form of repetition, what Butler terms "stylized acts", is the medium through which that sedimentation may be challenged. The physical repetition of categories of identity thus becomes essential to the subversion of such categories. How might such physical repetitions be formulated in performance, rather than in theory? Opening the focus of this interrogation beyond the specific categories of gender and sex, how might such physical repetitions be seen to place into question the originary notion of identity itself?



## *Falling Apart*

Butler's analysis, as a detailed decomposition of categories of identity which offer to lend the subject substance and cohesion, provides a key to understanding the dynamics of a braided identity formation addressed in Stanisic's work. For whilst this work, as I have already outlined, presents a specific formulation of the resonance of a place of national origin for the acting subject, gender, as an aggregate of identity, is also woven and marked within the complex dynamics of the performance. In relation to Butler's analysis, it is possible to trace the means through which Stanisic employs both of these categories of identity in this Self questioning work. However it is important to note that these distinct orders of identification carry with them very different political implications, and their operation on, and relation to, the subject needs to be distinguished. Categories of ethnicity can be seen to share, with the categories of gender which Butler outlines, a utility for the regulative and disciplinary operation of discourses of power upon the subject. Within contemporary critical studies, the terrain in which these operations have been most acutely examined is post-colonial theory. Here discourses of ethnicity, in particular as they inform the construction of race and nationality, have been examined in relation to Imperial histories, logics, and practices. In many of these works, colonial discourse, as it operates within the cultural products of Western advanced capitalist societies, is seen to be based on the oppression of ethnic, racial and national others. This oppression is one which is perceived to result from an ethnicised separation of Self and Other, analogous to that gender division instituted within the binary logics of patriarchal and heterosexual orders. Post-colonial theory, sharing feminism's concern to counter oppressive cultural forces,



aims to problematise and overturn the rigid casting of the Self and the Other, and the unitary identities which it consequently proposes. The ethnic inscription of the subject which these discourses of power instate is similarly seen as one which conceals its operation through a naturalisation of its categories. Here race could often be said to occupy a similar status to sex in its inscription as an immutable materiality (prior to discourse) which founds identity. However, most significantly for the discussion of Stanisic's work, not all elements of ethnic identity take a visible mark in the way that sex and race may, and even when they do, this does not mean that such categories attain the stability of ethnic identity which they seek to instill. Post-colonial theory commonly seeks to expose the Imperial logic of the discursive structures through which such distinctions and identities are instituted.

One of the main areas of concern within post-colonial theory's assault on Imperialist discourses has been the role that the body plays within the repressive containment and inscription of the alter individual.<sup>28</sup> As Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins have asserted, the subjection of the alter's body within colonial discourse proceeds through its fixing as an object of knowledge.<sup>29</sup> Through this casting of the alter subject, colonial logic is able to stabilise the White Western subject, by marking and excluding that which it is not. Just as Grosz and Butler saw radical political possibilities in the reinscription and resignification of the gendered body, post-colonial theory and performance practice, have often looked towards the body as a productive site of resistance to Imperialist discourses. As Gilbert and Tompkins note, "the staged post-colonial body is one of the most malleable and resonant vehicles for subverting and problematising the roles of identity, subjectivity,



and corporeality that colonialism has assigned to the colonised subject”.<sup>30</sup> Of the various aesthetic strategies which post-colonial performance employs Gilbert and Tompkins assert that the body in extremis, or what they term the “derogated body”, is a recurrent figure within this work.<sup>31</sup> Evidencing the operations of repressive colonial orders, “degraded, maimed, [and] imprisoned” bodies not only signal the human consequences of these regimes, but are often employed within allegorical structures, to denote “the political fortunes of the collective culture”. Some of the theatrical performances of this body of practice, extensively documented by Gilbert and Tompkins, could be classed within the political approach to colonial discourse which Gayatri Spivak has termed “strategic essentialism”, in that they tend towards the reinforcement of identity categories for oppositional political purposes. However, it is nonetheless the case, that a resistance to colonial discourse is commonly achieved across a large number of the performances in this body of work, through a disintegration of ethnically unitary identities and the binary differentiations of ethnicised subjects and objects, in which the altern subject is cast as the Other.

Stanisic’s work is far from an essentialist representation (whether strategically or innocently maintained) of the subject’s possibilities of identity. As I have indicated, the ethnic context in which Stanisic’s work is created is one where structures of ethnic differentiation and exclusion are evident. However since the work concerns itself with Stanisic’s national ‘origins’, the ethnic distinctions, which form a context of the work, take place within White European culture (loosely ascribed as the locale of the Imperial subject). This difference does not lessen the political significance of the ethnic identity



which Stanasic's work addresses, nor does it mean that power is absent from the institution of such an ethnic divide. These distinctions are ones which are not easily read through visible signs; ethnicity here does not take a visual mark. On the basis of the restricted knowledges accumulated through programme notes, publicity and the performance itself, to which of the many 'sides' within the Balkan conflict are we to ascribe Stanasic a belonging? Most importantly the presence of issues of ethnic identity is made complex by the operation of gendered categories within the work. In fact Stanasic's gender within this work does take a visible mark, though it is less foregrounded by her functional choice of dress, whereas her ethnicity is simply not discernible at the level of somatic signification. The sum of these different markings of the body, makes their employment within the structures of the work a matter of complex inter-resonance.

In Stanasic's work, it is through a social action, a re-signifying of the body, as both Grosz and Butler anticipated, that the dissolution and re-inscription of identity categories is facilitated. Just as the body of the post-colonial performance artists could be said to stand in for a "collective culture", so Stanasic's body is a metonym of two origins of place: of woman and of ethnic home. The performance can be read as an attempt to present, open and interrogate this order of representation. The central aesthetic tool through which this questioning takes place is Stanasic's own body; the repeated act of Stanasic's walk, testing with every pace, the validity of this metonymic mechanism which would lend her an identity. Stanasic employs her body as if it might become the ground of her Self; as if it might through the long and arduous task of walking grant to her Self a condition in which she would be still, stable, discrete, and thus unitary. The physical work which she



undertakes is one that takes her to the limits of her physical abilities. In this month long test of endurance her body is evidently under considerable stress. This particular use of repetitive action sets in play a complex series of resonances in relation to those categories of identity, gender and ethnicity, towards which the piece is employed. For whilst in a literal sense, Stanasic's labour is hers alone, as it is utilised as part of a metonymic structure, it thus embroils itself within existing gendered and ethnicised cultural resonances. The physical labour of women is deeply associated in mythological structures with the labour of childbirth and through this cultural codification with maternity and the figure of the mother. Similarly, physical labour within this specific ethnic context recalls the economically and politically enforced struggles of the European migrant and the toil against the adversity of exile to secure a home. In the locks of this associative pleat, maternity is bound up with a sense of ethnic origin; a mother-land is invoked. Most importantly, it is through Stanasic's harsh endurance that the human cost and consequence of the quest and establishment of such a place is made apparent to the spectator.

Here the curative and redemptive resonances, inherent in the informing meta-narrational structures and trajectories of this work's quest are given a complex revision. If Stanasic's search is one which is compelled towards a mother-land, then it is also one which seeks to combine the singularity and substance of that archetype with the solace and security of a place of home. This mother-land would resolve the subject's restless plight, annulling its internal division and its exile, dispelling its orphanhood, lending the comfort of wholeness and location. A mother-land would be an institution of Self (and consequently of Other), an affirmation of identity. But this originary place of identity within Stanasic's work is



evidently sought at a physical expense, and marked as an impossible goal. In order to achieve this state she must sweat out the days for near to a month; the temporal span of the ovulation cycle. In this sweating out, the boundary of the hermetic body, that interface and guarantor of the distinction between Self and Other, is permeated; a breach which calls into question the ethicality of such identifications. As much as this sweating out has to do with gender, it is also charged with ethnic implications. As an instatement of the binary distinction between Self and Other, as a resolution of internal division through expulsion, the salving of the ethnic wound, it calls to mind an ethnic cleansing. But like that horrific cleansing within which this sweating is inferred, the expulsion of the 'enemy within' does not secure a boundary and stabilize a nation, but rather engenders suffering and pain. The wound of the mother-land is cut again, recalling its feminine contours, the cost of Balkan war exacted through systematic rape and murder. The boundary is breached, the wound is opened, the nation divided, the body in pain; Stanisic is still walking.

The gendering of these dynamics of the quest for place is also played out in the work's very particular approach to the specular economy which it stages between itself and its spectators. As I have already discussed Stanisic's self-regard and interiorised out-look is one which disrupts the direction and singularity of the gaze within the traditions of gallery viewing. These spectatorial dynamics are also ones which carry a gendered history and involve dynamics of power. As John Berger has argued, art history and spectatorship is marked by a scopic tradition in which the feminine is figured as the static object of patriarchal orders of sight.<sup>32</sup> In Peggy Phelan's words, the feminine becomes that which is



“given to be seen”.<sup>33</sup> It may seem that Stanisic placing of her body is one which adopts precisely this pliant position within the work, as its focal object. However, the relations between the organisation of space, the use of the body and the scopic economy of the work make such an objectification highly problematic. As the spectator, I may certainly lavish in the spatial freedom which the work grants me, I am able to take any spectatorial position I wish within the gallery space, however none of these positions grant me access to a receptive eye. As Phelan has noted, the surety of the patriarchal gaze is dependent upon the integrity of, and reciprocity between its polar positions; the “gaze is possible both because of the enunciations of articulate eyes and because the subject finds a position to see within the optics and grammar of language”.<sup>34</sup> The centripetal pull of the organisation of looking within the space puts Stanisic at the dead centre of this piece, like the singularity of a black hole. Here, in the eye of the vortex, there is no eye at all. My gaze is refused; it is neither acknowledged nor returned. Stanisic does not appear as that body which is given to be seen. She does not reciprocate in the way an object should, complicit in the dynamics of a patriarchal gaze, but rather looks inside her Self, as if she to is seeking as we seek. The restless body into which she looks does not even provide an object for her scrutiny, a given to be seen, but is rather pressed towards an invisible goal. Still, she persists, as if her body might answer her eye. In her repetition of the spectator’s seeing, a *mise-en-abyme* of sight without final object, she draws to the attention of the spectator the dynamics of looking. The patriarchal orders of sight are not satisfied, since that object which these orders of sight seek, “the given to be seen” which “belongs to the field of knowledges of the one who looks” is nowhere apparent.<sup>35</sup> As a spectator, like Stanisic herself, I am unable to seize her Self as an object of knowledge. The metonymic



structure which should secure for Stanisic and for the spectator, a truth of identity, is broken in the refusals of an 'I' to her body, her body to her eye, her eye to my eye.

### *Dispersing the True Self*

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that one of the main cultural modalities of Western societies through which this notion of an interiorised truth has been regulated and disclosed is through the ritual form of confession.<sup>36</sup> Foucault locates this ritual structure within many institutional procedures, and perceives the confessional mode as one which works in the service of discourses of power which condition the subject. Many social exchanges, within the institutions of the family, the church, law, medicine, cultural production and the love relation, whether apparently 'freely' given or evidently induced, are shaped by this order of self-revelation of the subject's deepest interior knowledges. So much so, Foucault argues, that the obligational operation which conditions this omnipresent telling, is naturalised and itself secreted, leading us to believe in a reverse causality that interior truth essentially necessitates this telling;

it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, 'demands' only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of power weighs it down, and it can only be articulated at the price of a kind of liberation.<sup>37</sup>

Through the establishment of the truth of the subject as an interiority, and the secretion of the operation of discourses of power which form this very notion, a culturally persistent association of self-revelation with human freedom is instigated. Power thus conceals itself and instills an emancipatory ideal within the very act through which it contains the subject.



Though the confession is a transformative act for the confessing subject, it is not one which releases the subject from the grip of discourses of power. The subject may be ‘unburdened’ in the disclosure of the secret truth, as that understanding which was interior to it now meets an external ear, but for Foucault this ‘liberation’ does not amount to anything more than an “intrinsic modification” of the subject.<sup>38</sup> In fact the speaking subject as the object of its own articulations re-iterates and re-institutes its own identity in the confessional mode; this is then one of the key means through which, as Butler noted, identity shaped by discourses of power is repeatedly instated. The confessional act itself, always takes place within relations of power. As Foucault notes, the confessional ‘exchange’ requires an interlocutor whose role is the reception of the content of the confession and often its analysis, acceptance or judgement. For Foucault it is the interlocutor who is an agent of domination, not because they may have physically forced the confession (though Foucault notes that torture shadows the confession’s cultural history), but because their presence demands the revelation of a truth. The supposedly unknowing and silent interlocutor is an agency through which the speaking subject constitutes its own identity, and thus succumbs again to discursive construction.

Of course the culture-wide procedure of confession takes many different forms, and though the acts to which subject’s confess are equally diverse, sexualised activities (whether or not they might be classified by the confessor or interlocutor as such) are predominantly disclosed. Sexualised activity as it is unveiled within the multiple but systematic operations of the confessional form, gives access to a truth of identity. Here

again, this interior truth of the self can be seen to be profoundly implicated within the discursive formulation of sex. For Foucault the confessional form which elicits narrations of sexualised acts is pressed towards the establishment of *sex as a causality* in relation to social activity. Thus in his discussion of the adaptation of the operations of confession as they shifted in history from the governance of religion to that of science, he remarks that both the understandings of the sexual truth as a latency within the subject which the subject itself might not yet acknowledge, and even the recognition of the intersubjective creation of that truth within institutionalised encounters, did nothing to displace the sexual as the object of the confessional quest. Throughout these cultural and historical shifts, Foucault notes that,

Causality in the subject, the unconscious of the subject, the truth of the subject in the other who knows, the knowledge he holds unbeknown to him, all this found an opportunity to deploy itself in the discourse of sex. Not however, by reason of some natural property inherent in sex itself, but by the tactics of power immanent in this discourse.<sup>39</sup>

Thus for Foucault it is the historically and culturally specific discourses of sexuality which produce sex as a “fictitious unity and causal principle” of and within the subject. This enables the subject, within the grip of patriarchal and heterosexual logics, to see sex as the origin which founds the form, direction and content of its desire. This illusionary sex does not belong to the body prior to the discourses which inscribe it as belonging, and conceal the mechanisms through which they engender this impression. Confession emerges through Foucault’s analysis as the historically consistent and primary cultural form through which such notions are instilled.



The coincidence of both Foucault and Butler's location of the generation of categories of identity (such as sex and gender) within modalities of telling has significant implications for performance. How do the forms of telling which are utilised within performance reflect specific attitudes towards the constitution of categories of identity? If, as Foucault suggests, the sexual truth of identity is commonly disclosed through the ritual structure of confession, might that modality of telling which Butler proposes, the subversive repetition of the performative speech act, be brought to bare on the truth-claims of the confession? What aesthetic practices within a performance event might be seen as succumbing to the confessional mode, and what formal strategies might be ranged against such practices in order to counter or undermine those discourses of power which condition the subject?

*After the Crime, Impossible Speech*<sup>40</sup>

We broke a precious object belonging to a friend whilst she was away on holiday in the Summer of 1986. The object had no financial value to speak of, but we knew it was special to her because of the person who had given it.[...] We replaced the object with an identical one and discarded the pieces of the broken original. When our close friend returned we told her nothing, and for many months we continued to look at the new object wondering if she might spot some tiny difference. But she never did. In the next few years we replaced many of her possessions in this way, bleeding the truth and integrity out of the world which surrounded her.<sup>41</sup>

In 1994, at the National Review of Live Art, Forced Entertainment staged a five hour durational performance-installation called *Speak Bitterness*, which was later re-worked and reduced into a touring performance of the same name. In this initial work eight



performers, assembled in an intimate make shift room, ranged at a long steel table, confessed to thousands of ‘crimes’ to the small gathered audience. The offences to which the performers admitted were listed on, and apparently read from, texts laid out across this table closely dividing the confessors from their spectators. This work will form a focus, in the final section of this thesis, for an analysis of the means through which performance may enact a subversion of those modalities of inscription and instatement of identity, which Butler and Foucault present as the mechanisms of an oppressive regulation of the subject by discourses of power. In aesthetic terms, this subversion will be seen to emerge through the establishment of a complex set of contradictions which counter the discursive aims of the very form of the confessional which the piece repeats.

The spatial arrangement of the work is designed to both instill and break open specific resonances of the confessional form. The work employs a disturbance of the security-in-distance that is so much a part of the darkened auditorium of the institutional theatre experience, and the cool autonomy of the gallery space. The intimacy of the space is claustrophobic, placing performers a few feet away from spectators who are often ‘directly’ addressed. This intimacy is exposed and contradicted by elements of design and performance which operate against the quality of relations arising from the spatial organisation. In this work, bounded by the tight perimeter of canvass walls, the eight performers stand and sit a breath away from the spectators, closely connected by an unavoidable shared gaze. However, the proximity of this performer-spectator relation is disrupted by the insistence of a high kilowatt bleaching light, which flattens, distances and exposes. This contradiction is one which shapes the sensory perception and readership of



the work, rendering the relations between performers and spectators as both close and separated, private and public. The conditions in which spectatorship takes place within the work, are then, distinctly uneasy. The room itself, which the confessors and spectators inhabit, is minimally defined; its desk and chairs vaguely reminiscent of a number of institutional settings. In this blurred sketch of a locale, place dissolves into a vague and fluid space, a ghostly mix of other traces overwritten and impinging on a tiny room. Multiple possibilities of location merge here; this room is part police station, part game show, part torture cell, part court, part chat show. As an amalgam of cultural sites to which intersubjective disclosure is appropriate, the setting destabilises the reduction of the confessional form to a particular cultural locale, instead marking it, as Foucault noted, as an institutional practice which takes place across a number of different cultural fora. The rupture of the privacy of the confessional form and the indeterminacy of its location opens the cultural address of the work.

This use of minimal design, in which different cultural locales of the confessional appear as palimpsests, is accompanied by a specific temporal dynamic which similarly opens and examines the cultural form of confession. For whilst the work is durational, it seems to consist of only one form and modality, one 'moment', within cultural articulation, exploded, expanded and repeated. Forced Entertainment take the confessional form, that underlying ritual of cultural expression and guarantor of true identity, and anatomise its operation, in order to test its values, its imperatives and its limits. Inside this individual form of speech, where the spectator expects and hopes to find stable knowledge, true reality, and most importantly constant identity, Forced Entertainment insinuate a catalogue



of lies, maniac fictions and public fantasies. By the extenuation of the confessional moment, the work prolongs its life, and multiplies the dynamics of its telling and its narration in order to delay its closure. The excessive list nature of the confessions is one which replaces the traditional linguistic form of the confession, singular narratives revealing unitary truths as causal factors in the speaking subject's identity, with an uncountable set of narrative fragments, disclosing ambiguous and contradictory assertions, which cannot be reconstituted as the articulations of a unitary subject.

Etchells' text, in common with his body of work, draws on a rich reservoir of quoted and appropriated writings, familiar and unfamiliar, mutated and raw. In this inter-textual mesh the articulations of the confessors are marked as irredeemably secondary, their originality, and thus truth expressing capacity, is called into question. In particular, Etchells uses the register of axiomatic statement, the regurgitation of truisms, to express the dependency of the truths which the performers confess, the truths of their identity, upon existing sedimented cultural knowledges. Whilst some of these truisms enter the confessor's vocabulary without alteration, many others contain minor linguistic adjustments which subversively re-work their sense. Just as *Club of No Regrets* marked its performance as secondary through its use of explicit reading, *Speak Bitterness* is also shown as contingent upon scriptural work which predates the event, however here this marking is of a somewhat different order. Since I am aware as a spectator, that this is a long durational piece, I am also aware that the event which is taking place in front of me is occurring in a manner which must, to sum considerable extent, be unrehearsed. The complexity of the 'staging' of this work, its occasional interruptions of flow and overspeakings, lend to the



work a rhetoric of eventhood which is quite distinct from Forced Entertainment's larger scale theatrical productions. Of course the performer's dependency upon texts is utterly apparent, but their use of these texts in performance, their manipulation and inhabitation of their content, is more powerfully marked as a key concern of the work. In this respect the unreproducible now of the present articulation, the tempo of the performative speech act insinuates itself into the normally constative register of expression that is proper to the confessional form. But perhaps most importantly, combined with the re-working of axiomatic orders within the textual articulations, the re-use of existing significations and orders of representation, is foregrounded as the means through which identity, delivered in the disclosure of the confession, may be shaped.

The status of the confessional articulations as direct expressions, and thus belongings, of the subjects who speak them, in other words, the propriety of the statements of truth to their subjects, is profoundly undermined in this work. Whilst in the later re-casting of this piece into the stronger theatrical frameworks of a small-scale touring show, this disruption is achieved through a problematisation of representational structure proper to that context, in particular via a dis-establishment of characterisation, in the temporally extended and closed space of the performance-installation this effect is achieved through the staging of a clash between the forms of articulation and the resonances of the space. This is not the customary spectator's public arena (neither gallery nor theatre) but a secluded meeting place. The space is one which signals a closed and restricted world, huddling the audience together with its performers, and the style and delivery of the performances plays on intimacy and a specificity of address towards its spectators. Yet here, what I witness is



not the singular, private and personal talk proper to these conditions but rather a confounding communal telling. The pluralised and public content of the articulations ruptures the spatial conventions of the confessional form. Throughout there is a sense of impropriety and transgression as speech cuts against space and space against speech. The supposedly separate domains of the public and the private are again disrupted and then enfolded here.

Each articulation within this work is itself marked by a powerful contradiction which undermines the veracity and self-determining capacity of the confessional speech. The singular pronoun which is proper to confession is itself renounced, the 'I' who has sinned does not speak as 'I' but as 'We'. Consequently it appears that the confessions are 'impossible' in the sense that the confessors are individually admitting to the crimes of a culture and a society. Traversing the limitations of individual experience, the acts to which the guilty confess are extravagantly multiple, seeming to invoke proprieties to discrete genders, sexualities, races, cultural, political and moral values. Here the speaking subject seems to dissolve into the multifaceted culture which it inhabits, a culture which is rendered in this way within confession, thus portrayed as responsible for the formation and construction of the subject's interior truth. Yet, the literal possibility of an individual confessing to the crimes of culture is itself frequently contradicted through the specific and seemingly individualistic acts which the 'We' is supposed to have committed. This staging of a singular form of articulation within which the 'I' that articulates is repeatedly pitted against the pronominal sense of the articulation, perhaps suggest a further possibility, that



the 'I' is not an 'I' at all, in the sense of a unitary and coherent entity, but is instead a fragmented, contradictory and impossible being.

Clashes between the meaning content of the texts and their articulation, are a common means through which Forced Entertainment bring into question the authority of the acting subject and the texts which they speak. The performers themselves play with different registers of sincerity, often cutting the style and delivery against the attitude towards truth inherent in the content of particular sentences. The impossible is played earnestly, the trivial with gravity, the obscene with nonchalance, the mundane as exclamatory, the simple in an explanatory mode. A converse stylisation is also adopted, pushing the literal nature of delivery inherent within the content of the confession to an excessive limit, an unnecessary doubling of form to content. Whatever the mode of articulation or its content, there is always a sense of separation between the two, a splitting of the confession from the subject who speaks it, which renders improbable the articulation's status and verity as a subjective expression. As with the delivery of texts in *Club of No Regrets*, the saying of the fragments is a form of re-reading, a testing of their signifying possibilities. Just as the protagonists of *Club of No Regrets* were marked with an originary criminality, an acknowledgement of the inevitable reduction of, and violence to, the Other within the cognitive and representational operations of the knowing subject, so the confessions of the performers, are marked as lies, as betrayals of the truth of their own identities. *Speak Bitterness*, then, is a text where writing's failures and revisions are evidently inscribed. The confession fails to deliver the truth of identity, because of the epistemological error of all naming. Even the language those confessing speak is stolen



property. Each admission constitutes a new offence as they deliver their 'remorse' through pilfered words in a liturgy of deviously appropriated texts. Despite the multiple means through which the validity of the confessions comes to be challenged, the performance itself appears unanimously driven towards the discovery of the truth. There is a sense of conviction, a seriousness of address, of meaning at stake, a charged and 'authentic' sense of motivation, which constantly counters the disparagements of such possibilities within the work. The performers maintain almost continuous eye contact with the small audience, and the atmosphere of intimacy they sustain is one which foregrounds my participation as a spectator within the event. As I am often singularly addressed, my senses are heightened, and my reactions and those of the other spectators around me punctuate the event, and are often acknowledged within the timing, look and atmosphere that the performers craft. As a spectator, as the receiver of the confessor's address, I am, in a Foucauldian sense, the agent of these performing subject's domination. Through the work's overt reciprocal play, a sense evolves of the spectator's complicity within the drive of the performance towards the revelation of subjective truth. Forced Entertainment demand that I witness, and here as the trusted confessor, I am required to determine the truth, to answer the question of right and wrong, to redefine and re-invent what is lawful.

The guilty protagonists of *Speak Bitterness* seem to live in a society where the agencies of power and law have invaded every space, where to imagine freely is to resist and to act out your will is an illegality. The 'singular' life to which these confessions attest is then both extreme and mundane; an existence led at the margins and the centre of a culture. This is the life of the righteous criminal, the normal delinquent, where identity is always



marked by paradox, caught between the dream of endless self-invention and the knowledge of individual limitation. The presence of mundane everyday events alongside obviously criminal and ethically repugnant acts within the orders of confession suggests a cultural predomination of law. Since the transgressions which the performers have supposedly enacted constitute very different orders of propriety, there is a sense in which these orders of propriety are everywhere impinging upon the activities of the subject. The habitus in which the confessions “we fucked our brother” and “we planned the overthrow of governments” disclose equated degrees of criminality, is one in which discourse is an overbearing imposition on the subject. In this respect Forced Entertainment figure cultural discourse as a juridical prescription.

Within their extraordinary list of misdemeanors, sexualised acts are frequently confessed, however their relation to the speaking subject is deliberately decentred. For whilst we would expect the orders of the sexual to play a significant organisational role within the structures of confession, the sexual is lessened in its significance as an interiority of the subject which gives access to its identity, through its dispersal amongst other ‘crimes’ of what are in fact very different orders of ‘criminality’. In this respect the sexual appears subject to a more general law, it is marked as an object of a broader edifice of construction. Further, when the sexual does arise as a significant aspect of individual confessions, its relation to other sexual articulations, makes the perception of sex as a unitary and unambiguous category extremely difficult. What unitary sexual subject could confess to acts, amongst a vast and thus unquotable catalogue of ‘sins’, as diverse and contradictory as



We knew we were gay from the age of five. [...] We were naturists, fornicators and rent boys.[...] We travelled to Manila to fuck children. We believed that Jung was probably right about women.[...] We dated Asians out of curiosity.[...] We loved each other too much[...] We sent our daughters off into prostitution and one of them came back dying of AIDS.<sup>42</sup>

What is performed instead is an array of speech acts which lay claims to a sexual identity. Since this identity is evidently non-apparent, it would appear in this work, as Butler noted, that there is no doer behind the deed, no sexual identity as a causal fact of human behaviours, but rather a plurality of sexual acts, in search of an identity. Many of the sexualised confessions carry with them inherent implications within the fabric of their language which would designate a gender. However through their dissemination across different genders of performers, and their repetition by differently gendered performers, the gender conferring capability of these articulations is brought into question. The sex / gender identity categories which these descriptions of sexual acts ought properly to disclose are disrupted through this aesthetic tactic. In the performers' index of infinite wrongdoing the committed offences of *Speak Bitterness* trouble the moral laws of behaviour: those rules which sustain the myth of normality, and through which desire is separated from judgement and clarity is valued against ambivalence. With all of the sexualised confessions, sexual acts are marked as always already deviant, prescribed, inappropriate. In this manner the work presents sexuality as always transgressive of categories of identity, and simultaneously subject to social law, or discursive imposition.

Lying within the dense multiplicity of fragmentary texts which form this work's body of articulation, one particular confession, the story of the insinuation of objects into the



“world” of a “close friend” takes on a significant and allegorical status due to its length and unusually sustained approach to narration. The story works as an allegory of the operation of Forced Entertainment’s staging of the confessional. For like the act of the replacement of the original possession which Cathy Naden confesses to, the company insert a copy into the place of the (original) truth of identity, a cultural text usurps an essential ground. This insertion, like that of the fake treasured object is not ‘spotted’ because that object itself was never truly originary, but a gift that was given by someone else, an object in the cultural circulation of the goods of identity. In such conditions the truth of identity, like that of the precious belonging, is indiscernible, the original indistinguishable from the fake. In this context, a proliferation of versions of identity is asserted, a gradual replacement of all original objects with copies takes place. And the ground of the subject’s identity, like the world of the close friend, is bled of the very attributes which lend it its essential value, its “truth and integrity”. *Speak Bitterness* enacts a sustained attack on the possibility of establishing an identity as an interiority of the self, that very doctrine of interiorisation which Foucault and Butler identified as a mechanism of power. Here the cultural form and operations of confession are torn apart by their subjection to repetition and the unleashing of the unverifiable force of the linguistic performative. In this work aesthetics, whether in the confounding of the supposedly private and individualistic form of confession by its location within a public space; the undermining of the validity of the confessional articulations through an opening of their propriety to the speaking subject; the relegation of the truth of confession to a secondary order of textuality; the delivery of confessions cut against their content; the configuration of the confessing subject not as an ‘I’ who speaks but rather as the agency



of a cultural and communal speech; the decentering of the sexual as a causal category within subjectivity; or in the confusion of gender as a category which might lend stability to the subject, the possibility of instating an identity on the basis of the confession is irredeemably undermined.

These last three complex performance-installation works which I have discussed, *12am and Looking Down*, the untitled work of Stanisic and *Speak Bitterness*, form a coherent and aesthetically broad address to the contemporary formation, representation and dispersal of identity. *12am and Looking Down* and *Speak Bitterness*, concern themselves with a disarticulation of identity through the performance of plural categories of its construction. The former is composed of an intensely physical inhabitation of a reservoir of visual signs, markings upon the surface of the subject's body, whereas the latter shares an excess and circulation of identificatory significations, but here delivered through the subject's multiple speech acts. This plurality of possibilities of identity is absent from Stanisic's more cathected address, which shares with its companion works, an aesthetic combining a minimal and unitary structure with a vastly excessive repetition. In this work, however, the excessive proliferation is that of an epic physical endurance, the means through which Stanisic comes to interrogate those categories of identity, nationality and gender, which would lend her subjectivity a stable core. Where *12am and Looking Down* is concerned with presenting the impossibility of a unitary and stable identity in relation to its surface inscriptions, *Speak Bitterness* is concerned with the way in which such inscriptions are interiorised as the truth of the subject. Each performance, through these



unique aesthetics comes to open and disrupt the discursive mechanisms of identity formation.

Towards the end of *Speak Bitterness*, after almost five hours of confessional litany, in an aching silence in which it seems that the performance may finally have fallen silent, an isolated performer quietly admits, “we left a lot of things unsaid”. This statement is, as confessions go, simply not enough. Yet perhaps it will suffice, here, at least, since as confession it is antithetical to the very form in which it is spoken, leaving the question of the truth of identity unanswered, but unquestionably marked as a matter of speech. That to speak, to act, to perform, is always to leave things unsaid, perhaps goes without saying. But in many ways this statement encapsulates the relations between subjectivity, identity and performance that this thesis has interrogated. A ‘leaving unsaid’ is in fact inherent to the subject’s processes of thought, not least because the ‘unsaid’ is fundamental to the constitution of the Said, the negative capability upon which signification, language and discourse is grounded. The habitual economies of the Self and of the Same take place within and through these orders of discourse, and in this respect their very operation is predicated on such a leaving. The most unsaid of the subject’s thoughts is that Other, that non-meaning, that break in discourse, which would dissolve the constitutive fabric of thought itself. The act of confession is one which will always leave things unsaid, not least because the identity it seeks to institute for the confessing subject, is one which is founded on an epistemic exclusion, a bounding and substantiation of Self and Other. Identity, as a form through which the subject neglects and forgets the Other is predicated upon a leaving of the unsaid. Performance comes to trouble the subject’s forgetfulness and neglect. For

it is within the contestation of the subject's leaving, that performance comes to disrupt the habitual economies of the Same, to unbind the distinction between Self and Other, and to disarticulate identity. Performance comes to unsay what has been Said.



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<sup>1</sup> Gordana Stanasic, Programme Notes on the Installation / Performance, The Showroom, 4-29 May, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, 1990. Key works within the social / cultural constructionist notions of identity, and their conflict with essentialist models, are *Which Homosexuality?*, ed. Dennis Altman et al, Gay Men's Press, 1988, and Edward Stein, *Forms of Desire*, Garland, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Butler's use of the phrase 'compulsory heterosexuality' is drawn from Adrienne Rich's influential article, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', *Signs*, Vol. 5 Issue 4, 1980, however her use of this term strips the essentialist aspects of the analysis in which it was initially formulated.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. Cit.*: 1.

<sup>6</sup> Butler: 129.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDongall, New York, 1980.

<sup>8</sup> Butler: 23.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*: 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*: 112.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*: 16.

<sup>12</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Roudiez, CUP, 1982.

<sup>13</sup> See for instance Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and The Media*, UMP, 1987, and Jackie Stacey, *Teratologies: A Cultural Study of Cancer*, Routledge, 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Butler: 134.

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<sup>15</sup> See pages 202-213.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*: 136.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*: 142.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*: 136.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*: 30.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*: 31.

<sup>22</sup> *Op. Cit.*

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, 'Inscriptions and Body-Maps: Representations of the Corporeal', *Feminine / Masculine and Representation*, eds. Threadgold and Cranny-Francis, Sydney, 1990: 64.

<sup>24</sup> Butler: 124.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*: 128.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*: 137.

<sup>27</sup> See for instance *Queer Acts*, eds., Jose Esteban Munoz and Amanda Barrett, Women and Performance, Vol. 8:2 Issue 16, Women and Performance Inc., 1996, *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, eds., Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan, UMP, 1993.

<sup>28</sup> My phrase the 'altern subject' is adapted from that coined by Gayatri Spivak in her influential article, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Williams and Chrisman, New York, 1993: 66-111.

<sup>29</sup> Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*, Routledge, 1996: 204.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*: 253.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*: 221.

<sup>32</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin, 1987.



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<sup>33</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Routledge, 1993.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*: 158.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*: 160.

<sup>36</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1, An Introduction*, Penguin, 1990: 51-73.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*: 60.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*: 62.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*: 70.

<sup>40</sup> Aspects of this section were first written as part of an introduction to the text of *Speak Bitterness*: Adrian Heathfield, 'Bitterness and Betrayal', *Language aLive*, No. 1, Sound & Language, 1995.

<sup>41</sup> Tim Etchells, *Speak Bitterness*, unpublished script, 1994.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

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